

ABSTRACT

Read It Out Loud: The Construction of Southern Identity Within The Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project

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Utilizing Benedict Anderson's concept of community and nation, this study looks at how the American South was portrayed within the interwar years, specifically by or within the living newspaper plays of the Federal Theater Project. The criteria set forth by various critics from the time define the aspects of identity needed to create a representation of the South from a non-Southern perspective. The first set of plays that are analyzed are all products of the New York Unit: *Triple-A Plowed Under*, *Power*, and *The South*. The final living newspaper discussed is *King Cotton*, a regional piece written by the unit at Chapel Hill in North Carolina. Though written by non-Southerners, the style is distinctly of the region. This play offers a more authentic look at Southern identity through the blending of two forms of drama: living newspapers and folk plays.

Read It Out Loud: The Construction of Southern Identity Within the Living Newspaper Plays of
the Federal Theatre Project

by

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A Thesis

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DEDICATION

To Mom, thank you for being my biggest encourager. And for always bringing me Ski when I need it. And to Fig. Or is it Fern? Either way, my friend and never foe, Jessica- I could not have done this without you.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 1936, a group of five sharecroppers and a farmer discuss the land displacement and loss of income faced by the sharecroppers. The farmer can no longer grow cotton because of an agreement he made with the federal government. This loss of income causes the sharecroppers to join a union in order to retain their rights and homes. Though this is a very real circumstance faced by many farmers during the Great Depression, it is also a scene from the Federal Theatre Project's living newspaper *Triple A Plowed Under*. This scene depicts how Southern people were often portrayed within the living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project, where the region was portrayed by perpetuating stereotypes and 'othering' the South.

The main aim of this thesis is to examine the construction of the "American South" within the living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939), with a special focus on the four plays with direct ties to the South: *Triple A Plowed Under* (1936), *Power* (1937), *The South* (1936), and *King Cotton* (1938). One of the major ways that this will be done is to focus on the distinct identity of the geographic region in deconstructing and analyzing the content of the works and form of the living newspaper. Of these four scripts, only one, *King Cotton*, was influenced by Southern literary and cultural traditions.

The Northern and Southern parts of the United States America have always had distinct identities separate from each other. National and geographical identities was

noted by Benedict Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson states that nations have “finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.”¹ This is the case for the American North and South. Because the regions are geographically and socially different, the citizens of each have created their own imagined communities within their greater American identity. Thus, not only is the American South geographically different, it is culturally different as well. The end of the Civil War caused a shift in external perceptions of the South, as it was now seen as a vanquished nation which led to further ‘othering’ of the South. The separation between the two regions was reinforced by Northern thriving financial and cultural hegemony in the late 19th century.

This study investigates how the idea of a Southern identity was created within the living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project, specifically the living newspapers that were set in or contained mention of the South. The studies that have previously been done on the living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project attempt to analyze the scripts as pieces of literature, investigate the forms of the living newspapers themselves or look at the playwrights that assembled the living newspapers. John O’Connor’s “The Drama of Farming: the Federal Theatre Living Newspapers on Agriculture” investigates various living newspapers on the topic of agriculture and their connection to the larger source material or legislature of the period, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act. He does not look beyond this, and if he raises questions outside of this, he does not seek to answer them. Cecelia Moore’s *The Federal Theatre Project in the American South: The Carolina*

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. London: Verso, 1991, 7.

Playmakers and the Quest for American Drama is the foremost source on the Federal Theatre project in the American South. As the title suggests, this book looks at the Carolina playmakers and the theatre that they made during the era of the Federal Theatre. While there is one chapter heavily featuring unproduced living newspaper *King Cotton*, Moore is concerned with the playwrights and the process of the script creation and its eventual rejection rather than analysis of the script and how it relates to the broader, more embedded social issues of the time. John W. Casson in his *The Drama Review* article “Living Newspaper” and Stuart Cosgrove in his doctoral dissertation “The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form” explore the general form and history of the living newspaper rather than one specific idea or concept found within said plays.

This study will follow a similar form to that of Moore and O’Connor. It will attempt to synthesize the scripts of the living newspapers about the American South in the context of the social climate during the operation of the FTP to determine how the North was able to construct a representation of the South. While understanding the form of the living newspapers will play a vital role in this examination, it is more concerned with analyzing *Triple A Plowed Under*, *Power*, *The South*, and *King Cotton* in tandem with the social conditions of the era to uncover how the South was constructed within these works and how this construct of Southern identity is challenged by the Chapel Hill branch of the Southern unit through *King Cotton*, a play about the South written by people who lived there.

Aside from the aforementioned sources, materials on the Federal Theatre, such as Hallie Flanagan’s *Arena*, and materials about the American South and North-South relations are utilized in this study. Primary sources such as newspaper, journal articles,

and essays of the time will be used along with documentation gathered from the National Archives and Library of Congress in the Washington D.C. area. Additionally, the Betty Smith Papers collection found at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, detailing how the South functioned as a part of the Federal Theatre, is also utilized in this study.

The content of this study will be divided into three chapters exploring the South and the Federal Theatre Project. The first of these chapters will set the research and subsequent information in an exact place and time within American history, specifically the American South during the interwar period. During this time there was disparity between the South and the rest of the country; it was as if there were two distinct entities headbutting against each other rather than one collective unit working together.

Additionally, the South was in the midst of its own cultural renaissance as indicated by the many contributions to the American catalogue of literature, drama, and music from this era. From this point, the study utilizes the information found within the first chapter to assist in analysis of the living newspapers. The second chapter will focus on the four living newspaper plays that are set in the South. It will analyze *Triple A Plowed Under*, *Power*, *The South*, and *King Cotton* in terms of the way the South is described and construed in each work and how it compares to the mass media reports on the South and the way it was viewed by Southern audiences. The third and final chapter will look only at the final southern play the FTP commissioned. *King Cotton* is different in both content and form of the other living newspapers that the Federal Theatre Project produced.

Instead of taking the form of a typical living newspaper, it is rather a combination of living newspaper and domestic drama, for it follows the lives of one family rather than multiple groups of people. Additionally, much of the basis of *King Cotton* comes from

interviews and the personal accounts of the dramatists rather than the official documents and newspaper accounts from which other living newspapers gather their sources. Finally, this play offers little to no analysis of the issue at hand, nor is there a call to action for people to do anything to change the circumstances being depicted, as was common among other living newspapers. Each of these subsections will shed some light onto how the American South was 'othered' by the North and the effect that this had on the South, which would eventually lead to *King Cotton*, the only living newspaper about the South written from the perspective of a Southerner. *King Cotton* stands as a stark contrast to other living newspapers at the time. Most notably, *King Cotton* offers a realistic look at the American South during this time; it is not a caricature of the southern region of America.

Imagined Communities

In understanding how the South became a region with its own identity, political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, is useful. Within this work, Anderson posits that communities are social and cultural constructs; he claims a nation "is an imagined political community-- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."² This means that nations or communities are constructs that come out of the shared ideas of geography, culture, society, and politics.

² Anderson, 6.

He defines the nation as limited, for even though it could encompass a large expanse, it has boundaries which give it distinction from neighboring nations. Anderson also views nations as sovereign, meaning that a nation does not see itself as being under the rule of another. Which is to say, the country is independent because it is not ruled by anything other than itself. Finally, Anderson believes that a nation is a community because there is a deep sense of fellowship that exists between the members of the nation, no matter their social standing. One might imagine, for instance, the Olympics. Though the United States of America may be divided on a vast amount of social and political aspects, the members come together and not only do they participate in watching the sporting event, they become deeply invested in the idea of America.

This idea of nation that Anderson communicates provides a shared sense of self. Thus, all of these shared beliefs and ideas create a community, a strong linkage to other people who share the same area, beliefs, and leanings.³ This idea of nation will be explored in further chapters in regards to the ‘North’ and ‘South’ of the United States of America with particular attention paid to the South.

Within his work, Anderson details not only how nations come to be, but the historical changes that led to the creation of the concepts of nation and nationalism. The roots of nationalism and nationhood were found in the breakdown of three things: the religious community, the dynastic realm, and the idea of ‘simultaneity-along-time.’ For clarification, the medieval concept of time saw events occurring simultaneously in the past, present, and future. However, this concept was replaced by ‘homogenous, empty time,’ meaning that simultaneity was seen as extending across time. In other words

³ Ibid., 6-7.

events would simply happen as time comes, making everything coincidence rather than a prefiguring or fulfillment of other events set to take place. Because this new understanding of time was developed, people were seen as moving calendrically through time because all members of society experience the movement through time as a unit. This new understanding of time served to link people further in two ways: calendrical coincidence and print-capitalism.

To illustrate this point, Anderson utilizes the newspaper. To the idea of calendrical coincidence, the date at the top of the newspaper connects people through the idea that because we experience time as homogeneous and empty, everyone is moving along in time, even if they are not seen or known by other members of the community or nation. We are assured of this by the novelistic format of the newspaper. In regards to the idea of print-capitalism, Anderson relates the newspaper to a form of book. The years between 1500 and 1600 saw the rise of publishing commercial books (and newspapers) on a mass scale, leading to one of the most pertinent ways that communities are formed: print media. As he describes, “the newspaper is merely an ‘extreme form’ of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity.”⁴ Anderson goes on to discuss how the daily consumption of the morning newspaper furthers how the idea of community may be created via a print material. Though people read the newspaper in a solitary state, they are aware that though they may not know the identity of every person reading the paper at that particular moment, they are aware that they exist, tying the group together.

⁴ Ibid., 34.

This print media laid the basis for the formation of nation. The widespread publishing of commercial books, in particular, is specifically important to this analysis of Anderson's concept of nation. Until circa 1500, 'imagined reality' for many people was visual and aural because the regular, common person was illiterate. When publishing commercial literature was popularized, however, more people were able to learn how to read because print material, such as books and newspapers, was readily available and more affordable than the handwritten books of the past. An effect of this rise in print media was that language became stronger, specifically the common vernacular. From this point onward, there was an increase in reading and reading materials among everyday people, including women and merchants. Anderson postulates that this had a threefold effect: It allowed for communication in a broader scope, (i.e. people from different regions) were able to more effectively communicate with each other; the durability and fixedness of language made it so that history was able to be notated for more people, which lends itself to the nationalism through the creation of a shared, verifiable history; "languages of power" were formed, meaning that there were certain languages used in official capacity which were favored over other similar variants, creating a hegemonic language. These factors lead to further strengthening of national identity or shared community because people have a shared language.

The Construction of Southern Identity

After the Civil War, the people of the South created the idea of the "New South," which was heavily promoted by Southern journalist and orator, Henry Grady. This was a shift from a society that was mostly agrarian to one that embraced mechanized industry as well as agrarianism. One of the most notable concepts to come out of the South during

this time, which would continue for a significant portion of time, was the ‘Lost Cause’ narrative. According to scholars William J. Cooper Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill,

The Lost Cause evolved into a set of commonly held ideas that were ritualized, institutionalized, and often expressed in religious terms. The Lost Cause was the way in which southerners of the Civil War generation and their children understood the war and coped with crushing defeat, and it was the means they chose to convey that understanding to succeeding generations. Variants of the Lost Cause developed, reflecting changes over time... The Lost Cause, with its celebration of the mythologized old South and Confederacy, also provided a shield against the assaults of “outsiders” and a vehicle for expressing defiance toward a wide assortment of enemies, including the federal government.⁵

The ‘Lost Cause’ allowed for white Southerners to believe that their history was one of justice and heroism, a belief that was perpetuated among Southerners to create a sense that what they had done was not only justified, but morally upright. To those who recognized the Lost Cause, the South was defending the idea that secession was constitutional based on the principle that sovereign states may create and unmake associations. Thus, the supporters of the Lost Cause narrative argue that the true goal of the Confederacy was nobly fighting for the constitutional right to separate from the rest of the country, as opposed to the maintenance of slavery as an institution.

Another core belief of the ‘Lost Cause’ was that the South had not been defeated, rather it was exhausted by the sheer magnitude of the North. Finally, the Lost Cause narrative also argues that the Confederacy was a good Christian society, unlike the unaligned North which was too focused on economics and money-making. Cooper and Terril say, “The Old South, by contrast, according to Lost Cause doctrine, had been an

⁵ William J. Cooper Jr. and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History*, 1st trade ed. New York: Knopf, 1991, 432-3.

orderly, hierarchical, moral society based on evangelical Protestantism, less concerned with financial success that [sic] with honor and duty.”⁶ A clear issue with this argument is the practice of slavery; however, the ‘Lost Cause’ narrative held to beliefs of colonialism. That is, the Lost Cause doctrine perpetuated the idea that this society had elevated black people by teaching them the Christian faith and ‘civilizing’ them.⁷ The Lost Cause created a romanticized account of the Old South, focusing on the gentility and Christian morals while neglecting the tumultuous racism that was rampant. The Lost Cause represents the national (Southern) memory of the Civil War and has been the substitute for factual history of the event and post-War society.

In order to understand the Northern construction of Southern identity, it is imperative to evaluate Southern identity as seen in the media of the region. The romanticized vision of the South put forth by the Lost Cause is seen throughout media well into the 20th century. Notably, D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), based on the 1905 novel *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, and Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936), which spawned the epic movie by the same name in 1939, both employ the ‘Lost Cause’ narrative. Both Mitchell and Dixon were Southerners, so their works create a Southern Identity from a completely different perspective than the works of the FTP. *Birth of a Nation* is a notoriously racist film, but was also a titanic achievement of cinema, going on to become the first blockbuster in Hollywood history. It is set during the Civil War and the Reconstruction era that followed, focusing on two families, the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons. The first half of the film covers the

⁶ Ibid., 434.

⁷ Ibid.

outbreak of the Civil War through Lincoln's assassination, while the second half focuses on the two families Post-war, during Reconstruction. Within the film, freed blacks are portrayed as brutish, bestial, and unintelligent while the Ku Klux Klan were depicted as heroic saviors of the South. It was so effective in making the group look valiant that the film was used as a recruiting tool for decades after. Author of *The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Filmmaker and a Crusading Editor Reignited America's Civil War*, Dick Lehr, critiqued it saying "[Griffith] portrayed the emancipated slaves as heathens, as unworthy of being free, as uncivilized, as primarily concerned with passing laws so they could marry white women and prey on them,"⁸ *Birth of a Nation* portrays the Lost Cause doctrine wherein Reconstruction was seen as ineffective and black people were not only lower class, but as a subaltern being. The final important thing to note about this film is, at the time, the movie was widely accepted as historically accurate.⁹

Similarly, *Gone With the Wind* is also set in the South, specifically Georgia, during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. It is a romantic story about the American Civil War through the lens of the Confederacy. The protagonist of the book is the young Scarlett O'Hara, a typical Southern belle. The film demonizes carpetbaggers (Northerners who came to the South after the Civil War for political or monetary gain) and ex-slaves, with the KKK wreaking vengeance upon an ex-slave who sexually assaults Scarlett. In an interview, Mitchell described O'Hara's life in the post-war South as "the terrible days of Reconstruction and the story carries her, and Atlanta, up to the time when the

⁸ NPR Staff, "100 Years Later, What's the Legacy of 'Birth of a Nation'?", *All Things Considered*, Podcast Audio, Feb 8, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation>

⁹ Ibid.

Carpetbaggers had been run out of Georgia and people could begin living their normal lives again.”¹⁰ One of the most important aspects of this novel and subsequent film adaptation is that it gave the world a sense of the ‘Lost Cause’ Old South. It became emblazoned on the national memory in conjunction with the Civil War. The politics of the war and the pro-slavery convictions of the South are obstructed by the romance of this book, but still entirely visible to the discerning eye. Though this novel is only a slice of what the South was like and it is not a factual, historical account, it is what many Americans remember about the Civil War. Even though it is not accurate, it, like *Birth of a Nation*, became a part of the cultural memory of the South. Once again, this work plays into the myth of Reconstruction that was created by the Lost Cause. While Southerners created their own mythos of Southern identity, the North crafted their own vision of what that might be.

¹⁰ “Margaret Mitchell: American Rebel,” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, February 11, 2020.

CHAPTER TWO

The FTP, Living Newspapers, and Northern Perceptions of the South

“We’ve got a lot of actors on our hands. Suppose you come in to New York and talk it over.”¹

-Harry Hopkins to Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*

Formation of the Federal Theatre Project

In February 1934, Harry Hopkins, director of the Works Progress Administration, called Hallie Flanagan about the prospect of helping to come up with a plan for the federal government to assist out of work actors and theatre makers. As is common in many instances, the arts were some of the first leisure activities to lose their consumer base during the Great Depression because the average person could not afford to spend money on the arts on a regular basis. In an attempt to solve this issue for creatives, Federal One was put in place. Under Federal One four arts programs were established: the Federal Music Project, the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Art Project, and the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Federal One also endeavored to make art more accessible to a larger number of American people and to integrate art and artists into society. Regarding the Federal Theatre Project specifically, the works explored issues relevant to the general public, thereby making their programs more effective and contemporary.²

¹ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre*, Limelight Editions, 1969, 3.

² Stuart Kidd, “Federal One.” *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, edited by Robert S. McElvaine, vol. 1, Macmillan Reference USA, 2004, pp. 349-351.

While each Project within the realm of Federal One did this, it was a major focus of the Federal Theatre Project.

One of the ways the Program was effective was in the use of government provided funding. Only ten percent of the funds for these programs went to production supplies, the remaining ninety percent were salaries. In order to realize the Federal Theatre entirely, an administrator had to be employed, along with figuring out how to create and sustain a nationwide theatre. Hallie Flanagan was the first choice for this position.

Flanagan and Hopkins were both from the same town in Iowa, and he was familiar with Flanagan's experimental and creative theatre work at Vassar and in New York. She initially declined Hopkins' offer to be involved with the FTP, as she was set to build an experimental theatre at Dartington Hall in England. However, she came to feel that she was not the person to build an English experimental theatre, and she and her husband went on a tour across Europe to see what theatres were producing. During her travels, she gained inspiration that would later appear in her work with the FTP, specifically in the work that was being performed by the theaters in Russia. When she returned to the United States in 1935, she agreed to meet with Hopkins in Washington, but beforehand, Flanagan began to search for people and ideas that would align the government with the arts.

She failed to do so until she met with friend and noted playwright Elmer Rice. During their meeting, Rice detailed how he had previously gone to Washington to speak with Hopkins to secure government funds for the Theatre Alliance. According to Rice, during this meeting, Hopkins said, "Katharine Cornell has been here, and Frank Gillmore

and Edith Isaacs and Eva Le Gallienne and they are driving me crazy. . . . When I talk about plans for an American theatre, each one talks about his own little problem. Isn't there any one person in America who has no axe to grind?"³ Rice explained to Flanagan that his immediate response was to recommend her as he believed it was vital that whoever was put in charge was not connected to any one particular existing theater, but rather to supporting and creating theater throughout the nation in a variety of ways and for a variety of people.

The idea of a national theatre was a long-held passion for Flanagan. When she met with Elmer Rice, they came up with a project where regional or local theatre companies would produce plays that worked best for the needs of their community at a low price so that all people in the area could attend. This was influenced by the Little Theatre Movement that began in the 1910s; there were already some community theatres established with which the FTP could work. This also accomplished the goal of having community theaters at the heart of the Federal Theatre and therefore integrating the arts into everyday life.

Flanagan arrived in Washington shortly after her meeting with Rice to begin discussions on developing a national theatre. They came to the conclusion that utilizing existing community theatres was the best route to take. She also detailed these plans to Iowa-based director E.C. Mabie who was excited to assist in formulating how to make regionalized theatres work for the nation-wide program.⁴ Mabie suggested that Flanagan

³ Jane De Hart Matthews, "The Chance of a Lifetime" from *Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*.

⁴ Ibid, 12.

and Rice attend the National Theatre Conference because it was deeply committed to regional theatre.⁵ Eventually, the plan for five regional theatre centers— Chicago, New Orleans, New York, Boston, and Los Angeles— was developed. The intention was that these would be the largest of the regional centers connected to the FTP and that they would be resources to the smaller regional theatres within their area. Resources included advice for playwriting, service, and research to the theatres within the region; this was particularly important because it meant that the regional theatres were creating works tailored to their own local history and current relevant topics. Additionally, the FTP had both a Negro theatre and a Yiddish theatre in order to include as many groups as possible in the Project. In order to assist in this effort, works were performed in various languages including French, German, and Spanish. The goal was to address the regional concerns of people across the country. When this plan was put forth, Hopkins readily approved, and Flanagan was officially installed as the director of the Federal Theatre Project on August 27, 1935.⁶

Following the plan, the United States was divided into regions, each with its own units and branches extending throughout the area. The Southern region had units scattered throughout Texas, Georgia, Oklahoma, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Florida, and North Carolina. In her book, Flanagan mentions in *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre* how the South offered a wealth of untapped dramatic material and a desire for entertainment, “The South presented perhaps the most fascinating problem in the setting

⁵ Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 22.

⁶ Matthews, 34.

up of Federal Theatres: rich dramatic material in the variety of peoples, the historical development, the contrasts between a rural civilization and a growing industrialization, such material practically untouched dramatically; and an expressed need for entertainment on the part of many communities.”⁷ However, there were very few theatre professionals in the region; furthermore, the majority of these professionals were out of practice because they had been out of the field for too long and were forced to take jobs elsewhere. Nonetheless, the theatre practitioners were excited to be back in the theatre. They utilized what Flanagan described as the “flying squadron” approach for the Southern units; John McGee, Josef Lentz, Fred Morrow, and Herbert Ashton went from unit to unit as they were needed. While some units in the South struggled to maintain or find success, the unit in North Carolina, Chapel Hill thrived under Paul Green and Frederick Koch.⁸

Facing intense scrutiny and censorship issues, the FTP came under attack when it was put into question by the House Un-American Activities Committee which was investigating propagandist activities. The Project and many of its members were accused of holding communist ideals and perpetuating them within the work. Though there were several defenders of the FTP, including Flanagan, Orson Welles, and Brooks Atkinson, United States Congress disbanded the Federal Theatre on June 30, 1939.

⁷ Flanagan, 83, 101.

⁸ Flanagan, 81-113.

Living Newspapers

One of the most popular and notable types of works that the Federal Theatre produced were known as living newspapers. Living newspapers were a form of documentary theatre which reported real events and happenings in theatrical form. These works broadened the horizon of American theatre by combining various elements of discourse in fresh ways. Dance and highly choreographed staging, social commentary, and use of emerging audio-visual technology contributed to creating a dynamic and forward-thinking style of American theatre. Noted as some of the most creative pieces the FTP produced, living newspapers became a staple project. Each living newspaper was typically concentrated on a central theme, oftentimes a hot button social issue, though this was not always the case. These plays were meant to not only entertain the audience, but also to instruct and call them to action. Flanagan, Rice, and Joseph Losey were all eager to bring this format to a greater American audience.⁹

The living newspaper became the fourth national division in the FTP. In September of 1935, Flanagan met with Elmer Rice and his wife, Hazel. Believing that he was incapable of accommodating a large number of actors, and that there would need to be numerous plays with many cast members produced in order to keep everyone working, Rice claimed that he was unsure if he should be the head of the New York unit. It would have been a logistical nightmare. Flanagan then suggested that they produce living newspapers, a far less expensive option (as opposed to a traditional play) and one that would allow the Project to use a vast number of cast members. Rice was immediately

⁹ John W. Casson, "Living Newspaper" *TDR (Cambridge, Mass) 44, no. 2 (2000):* 107.

relieved upon hearing this and accepted the role as director for the New York unit. Soon after, the New York unit teamed up with unemployed newspaper men coordinated and headed by Newspaper Guild organizer Morris Watson. The unit was modeled after an editorial team of a newspaper office, with an “editor-in-chief, managing editor, city editor, reporters, and copyreaders...in the attempt to create an authoritative, dramatic treatment, at once historic and contemporary, of current problems.”¹⁰ The living newspaper unit was run as if it were a combination of research center and newspaper office. This allowed them to create dynamic works which would appeal to a majority of people across the nation, raise awareness about the topic being covered, and serve as a call to action for a current social or political issue.

Though these living newspapers were new ideas to most American audiences, they had been produced long before a separate unit was created for the FTP. Flanagan’s *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, produced in 1931 at Vassar, closely resembled the model for a living newspaper, though more controversial and experimental. Made up of seven scenes, *Can You Hear Their Voices?* details Whittaker Chambers’ account of the Arkansas drought and how undernourished ‘dirt’ farmers were waiting for Congress to do something for them. A *New York Times* review detailed that the production was a “series of black and white vignettes . . . capped by small blackouts and interwoven argumentatively with the stark facts of Congress’s inaction thrown at you from printed slides on a huge white screen. Dominating the picture was the barbed lampoon of the quarter million dollar debutante party which startled Washington at the height of the

¹⁰ Flanagan, 65.

drought.”¹¹ While this play was more controversial and polarizing, (it seemed to take sides and the source material was not from government documents or newspapers) it had clear elements of the living newspapers that the FTP would go on to produce. This includes the Voice of the Living Newspaper character, presentation of statistics and facts of the drought issue, short vignettes focused on a contemporary social issue, an effective call to action for the audience, and finally, it was performed across the country by other theatre groups.

Can You Hear Their Voices? was not the only inspiration for living newspapers. Their format goes as far back as post-revolution Russia as detailed by Stuart Cosgrove “the basic aesthetic and methodological principles of Living Newspaper are firmly grounded in the material realities of the revolution.”¹² Most cite the agitprop plays of the Soviet theatre as inspiration for what came to be known as a living newspaper.¹³

The first living newspaper written for the Federal Theatre was *Ethiopia* (1936). This detailed the invasion of Ethiopia by Italian forces led by fascist leader Benito Mussolini. During this invasion, the Italian military committed several atrocities against the Ethiopian people. With its timely issue and room for theatrics, this was an ideal topic choice for the first living newspaper. *Ethiopia* was written by Arthur Arent as his first big assignment with the Project; he was instructed to write a fifteen minute skit that was to be the main news story of the show, sandwiched between 3 and 5 minute timely news

¹¹ *New York Times*, May 10, 1931, Sec. 8, p. 2

¹² Stuart Cosgrove, “The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form,” Doctoral Dissertation, 1982, 3.

¹³ John E. Vacha, “The Federal Theatre’s Living Newspapers: New York Docudramas of the Thirties,” *New York History* 67, no. 1 (1986): 66-88.

stories. Elmer Rice and Morris Watson chose the topic of the Ethiopian invasion because it had already aroused the sympathy of the American public. When Rice saw what Arent had written, he scrapped the rest of the show in order to focus solely on this topic. Shortly after the opening the Project leaders announced that the production would be delayed until January 29th of 1936, due to controversy over its depiction of international events, especially the representation of Mussolini. This delay would extend until it was clear that the production would never see the light of day. In order to combat what was effectively censorship, Elmer Rice gathered a group of reporters and critics to come to a private dress rehearsal, which was the only time it was performed.¹⁴

After the failure of *Ethiopia*, Arthur Arent and his team turned to a topic that was more local, and decided on agriculture. The first and one of the most notable living newspapers that the Federal Theatre produced was *Triple A Plowed Under*. This piece detailed the struggles of mostly midwestern, Dust Bowl farmers and the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Throughout its twenty-seven scenes, the audience learned about the current plight of the farmers and how the industry impacted society.

Living Newspapers in Practice

The living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project, with the input from Morris Watson's Newspaper Guild, became more 'investigative' in nature.¹⁵ Not only did this newspaper room structure make it possible for the organization to turn out work quickly and efficiently, but there were people overseeing, editing, and fact-checking the work. As

¹⁴ Arthur Arent, "'Ethiopia': The First 'Living Newspaper,'" *Educational Theatre Journal* 20, no. 1 (1968): 15-31.

¹⁵ Cosgrove, 47.

noted in the *Federal Theatre* magazine, “The [living newspaper] Script differs from a conventional play in that it is not ‘written’ as a play is written; it is reported... The reporters of the Living Newspaper are not permitted to invent anything, or to arrange. They cannot choose a climax or a moral. They take the news exactly as it is and prepare it for the stage.”¹⁶

Additionally, the Newspaper Guild was also similar to a research center so that playwrights could be actively writing about important topics while other people researched the topics. As stated by director Joseph Losey, “The Living Newspaper was a social theatre and it did have a strong editorial point of view... The point was to break into new forms... and into a more direct communication with ideas.”¹⁷ Not all units, however, had the luxury of the newspaper office set up. At the branch at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, the unit had a handful of playwrights and some graduate students that would gather the information and conduct the research themselves before writing a play. In essence, the information was not synthesized for the playwrights before it was given to them. However, the playwrights in these regional offices did maintain, for the most part, the style of living newspaper that was put forth by the larger city units.

The living newspapers produced by the Project broke away from the stage conventions that people were used to. The script for *Ethiopia* set several precedents for the form of an FTP living newspaper, that while not new, were new to stages in New York and the rest of America. Foremost, it introduced the loudspeaker. It also established

¹⁶ “Editing the Living Newspaper”, *Federal Theatre Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 16.

¹⁷ Joseph Losey quoted in A. Goldman, "Life and Death of the Living Newspaper Unit", *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. III, No. 9, January-March 1973, p. 76.

the basic techniques of sound effects, projections, crescendos, dates, swift blackouts, and a montage of facts.¹⁸ The writers of these works favored non-naturalistic conventions, stage design, and dramaturgy. Many of the elements that became characteristic of the living newspaper were swift scene changes; flexible stage space; scenery that was easily moved; scrims to set a scene; projections; statistics; film; sound effects and musical scores; abrupt blackouts; puppetry; modern dance; and pantomime. Additionally, playwrights were urged not to diverge from the central issue nor stay with one scene too long so as to keep the audience interested.¹⁹ The technical structure of living newspapers is almost always the same. Each has a focus on current events, the character of the Voice of Living Newspaper, sound design and music, Non-realistic dramaturgy, and the “Little Man” character. Additionally, this format allowed for a large number of theatre practitioners to be employed under the Project.

All living newspapers were based on current events that had a heavy impact on the public. They were to provide information to the public and call people to action to take part in their government to improve their lives. This educational and incentive style was a certain way to get people to attend the theatre. Likewise, after the disaster of *Ethiopia*, living newspapers became focused on domestic rather than international issues.

As previously mentioned, the Voice of the Living Newspaper is one of the staple characters within these works, seen in almost every production. This character is essentially the narrator of the show, appearing only in vocal format; it is the character that

¹⁸ Cosgrove, 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, v-vi.

walks the audience through the happenings of the play. It shares location, time, background, and people.

The “Little Man” character is the stand-in for the common person. In other words, the Little Man represents the audience within the world of the play. Oftentimes, the Little Man character would be there to question why decisions were being made. The Little Man is also there to inform government officials about what was actually happening to the general public in regards to the issue at hand. Additionally, the Little Man character typically begins the play by opposing New Deal policies, but by the end he comes to understand their importance.

Living newspapers also utilize sound design and music to set the scene of the piece. The inclusion of music, sound design, and the set design allowed for more theatre technicians to find work within the FTP. Because of this, not only actors would gain employment, but also those working behind the scenes would be able to make an income.

Though there are many similarities in the living newspaper oeuvre, there are also distinct differences. Notably, the living newspapers created by regional offices had different offerings than those of the units in large cities, i.e. New York. The notable difference with these was that they contained regionalisms. The Southwest unit located in California researched and scripted *Land Grant* and *Spanish Grant* addressing the 1848 cession of California and the poor treatment of Mexican landholders and corrupt land deals in addition to more contemporary issues such as racism, housing discrimination, and joblessness.²⁰ In Washington state *Timber* was developed to speak to the forestry and

²⁰ *Spanish Grant: A Living Newspaper*, Worldcat.

lumber industry of the state. The unit from Iowa wrote the script for *Dirt* about the agriculture in the state. *Stars and Bars* was a script written about the status of black citizens in the Hartford area of Connecticut by the regional unit there. These regionalisms spoke to the issues within their regions, rather than the things that were happening to people across the country.

Though none of the aforementioned were produced for various reasons, there were successful regional scripts. For instance, one of the biggest living newspapers in Chicago was called *Spirochete*, which was about the syphilis epidemic that was affecting Chicago at that time. Though the disease was treatable depending on the stage, it was a disease of shame that made people stay silent. Because of this, it continued to spread until public health campaigns began to raise awareness and testing became anonymous. Though *Spirochete* dealt directly with medical researchers searching for a cure, it depicted these events and subsequently became an incredibly popular show among theatre-goers across the nation. According to Gysel, "...the more than 100 performances of *Spirochete* in five cities made significant contributions to health issues and attitudes in the War on Syphilis...*Spirochete* was a vibrant viable form of education."²¹

Though the living newspapers were some of the most successful works that the Federal Theatre Project produced, the American version as is discussed within this study largely died out when the Project did. While many of the other divisions within the WPA could be convincingly argued as necessary for community betterment, the less tangible activities of cultural production, such as the Federal Theatre, were more difficult to

²¹ Libra Jan Cleveland Gysel, *Whisper Out Loud! "Spirochete", a living newspaper, 1937-1939, produced by the Federal Theatre Project, an instrument for public health education in the War on Syphilis*, 1989, Dissertation.

defend partly because their success was difficult to measure and partly because it was more concerned with aesthetics and politics rather than function. Detractors of New Deal programs found an easy target within the Federal Theatre and linked the contentious program to communism. As reported by *The New York Times*, “It is apparent from the startling evidence.... that the Federal Theatre Project not only is serving as a branch of the communistic organization but is also one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine.”²² When the Federal Theatre Project was ended in July of 1939, many living newspapers were lost with it. With the FTP gone, the only group supporting these works was the New Theatre League. However, the NTL was badly weakened by defections from the Communist Party. As the group lost cultural influence, it eventually disbanded in the early 40s. Without these footholds, the living newspaper faced a bleak future. There were groups that performed leftover living newspapers such as *Medicine Show* (1939), however, it was unfeasible to sustain these shows on a commercial stage- the cost was simply too high. Though there were later attempts to revive or recycle the model of the living newspaper, they never met with much success.²³

Anderson’s Print Media and FTP Living Newspapers

The living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project are even more interesting in light of Anderson’s notions of print language. Though they are performative in nature, the living newspapers were approached in nearly the same way a regular newspaper would have been; the research for these productions came from newspapers themselves,

²² Cosgrove, 132.

²³ *Ibid.*, 140-4.

or the same sources used by journalists. The living newspapers are a performative extension of print media and thus contain the same threefold effect discussed by Anderson. To the first point, that of communication in a broader scope, living newspapers made news and federal documentation more accessible to a broader audience, especially to an audience that contained illiterate consumers. The visual medium made it easier, and presumably more enjoyable, for people to take in so the message will reach a larger number of people. To the second point, that of a shared and verifiable history being more available for mass amounts of people, not only did the newspapers and other legal documentation utilized for the living newspapers serve as a testimony to moments in history, the plays became a part of history themselves and served as another tool with which to understand the social climate of their origin. Finally, Anderson's point about official and hegemonic vocabulary and languages of power are found within the living newspapers. Though the language is the same in these plays, and although all characters speak English, there are scenes where characters speak in a regional dialect. These levels of language indicate hierarchy and changes of power. For instance, in *King Cotton* there are characters who speak in full regional dialect, putting them at the lowest level of the hierarchy according to the Northern hegemony. Characters like Hubert Britt are below those who speak the language of power with no variation, like Mr. Expert who would be at the top of the chain of power. Southerners like the Britts are written to speak with more of a southern drawl, but not in full dialect, puts him above the characters who speak in dialect, in the hierarchy.

Anderson also discusses the usage of images and visuals by media in order to create and strengthen nationalist ties within communities. Through the use of images,

groups and individuals are able to put forth ideas and concepts about the imagined communities. With the power of these images, Anderson posits, the media is able to put forth certain ideas about groups. Even though these ideas may not be true, they become accepted by the community. It is this process that not only results in stereotypes, but the perpetuation of stereotypes. This concept, combined with the use of living newspapers as a form of performative print media, demonstrates the efficacy of the FTP as a tool to both create and strengthen communal ties while at the same time perpetuating stereotypes. As previously mentioned, living newspapers utilized multimedia devices in order to effectively portray the intended message of the production. Within the world of the living newspaper, the usage of images allowed for the creators of the piece to illustrate the topic and theme of the issue, but it also allowed for the political leanings and opinions of the theatre-makers become part of the content. Because of this, the (accidental) perpetuation of stereotypes is found within the script. As Anderson stresses, the usage of these images helps to create an imagined community within the theatre-goers, and though what was perpetuated may not necessarily be factual, it is accepted as so within the imagined community.

Southern 'Otherness' and Northern Perceptions of the South

The final thing that needs to be addressed within this chapter is the Northern perception of the South and how the idea of the “South” was constructed by the North. Historian and author James C. Cobb notes that “the inclination both to make invidious comparisons between the South and the North and to see the latter as the normative standard for the entire nation dated back well before the civil rights era to the earliest

days of American independence.”²⁴ While this goes back to a post-Civil War era, it was still common well into the 20th century.

H.L. Mencken’s notorious 1917 essay, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” expressed his disdain for the American South by identifying and decrying many stereotypes of the region. His work acts as a template for the rest of this study as the stereotypes he lays out are reinforced in the living newspapers. He believed it to be stuck in the past and subsequently unable to offer anything new to the cultural landscape; Mencken saw the South as a barren wasteland. He states:

And yet for all its size and all its wealth and all the ‘progress’ it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally as the Sahara desert... If the whole of the late Confederacy were to be engulfed by a tidal wave tomorrow, the effect upon the civilized minority of men in the world would be but little greater than that of a flood on the Yang-tse-Kiang. It would be impossible in all history to match so complete a drying up of a civilization.²⁵

This essay firmly encompassed the beliefs held by many Americans who thought that the South had peaked and there was nothing, intellectually or artistically, that the region could offer to American culture. Throughout the essay, Mencken further details the issues of the South, namely the lack of culture and intellectualism along with racism. According to Mencken, this lack of culture has to do with the fact that the sophisticated and high-bred Southerners fled the region after the Civil War to other regions or countries and the people they left behind were ‘white trash.’ Within this diatribe, he states:

Politics in Virginia are cheap, ignorant, parochial, idiotic; there is scarcely a man in office above the rank of a professional job-seeker; the political doctrine that prevails is made up of hand-me-downs from the bumpkinry of the Middle West-Bryanism, Prohibition, all that sort of filthy claptrap; the administration of the law

²⁴ James C Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, 2.

²⁵ H.L. Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” *The American Scene: A Reader*, Alfred A Knopf: New York, 1977, 157-158.

is turned over to professors of Puritanism and espionage; a Washington or a Jefferson, dumped there by some act of God, would be denounced as a scoundrel and jailed overnight.²⁶

Not only does Mencken argue that those in power are intellectually unfit for their positions, but that the overall governmental and legal structure of the region is deeply flawed. By comparing the politics of the region with Prohibition and Puritanism he reinforces the conception of the South as a place unwilling to change and guided by outdated principles.

Mencken also addressed some of the race issues within the South, with special attention to lynching, people of mixed race, and how the only culture in the South comes from black people. Though his own language is racist and problematic in itself, it is clear that these issues in the South were well known to his audience as he is presumptive in his references. In connection to the race issues, Mencken mentions a time he wrote about Southern lynch culture:

Another time, I published a short discourse on lynching, arguing that the sport was popular in ‘the South because the backward culture of the region denied the populace more seemly recreations. Among such recreations I mentioned those afforded by brass bands, symphony orchestras, boxing matches, amateur athletic contests, horse races, and so on. In reply another great Southern journal denounced me as a man “of wineshop temperament, brass-jewelry tastes and pornographic predilections.” In other words, brass bands, in the South, are classed with brass jewelry, and both are snares of the devil! To advocate setting up symphony orchestras is pornography!²⁷

Here again Mencken strengthens the idea of the South as a region unwilling to progress. Furthermore, lynching in the South is a common act, which according to Mencken, is viewed as acceptable. He illustrates a disturbing dual nature wherein

²⁶ Ibid., 169.

²⁷ Ibid., 166.

fanatical religious conservatism is mixed with racial injustice. Mencken's distaste for and criticism of the South would continue on throughout his career.

One example of Mencken's disdain was revealed through *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes* trial, one of the most notable events to happen in the South during the interwar years. In 1925, the Tennessee legislature passed the Butler bill, which outlawed the teaching of evolution. John Thomas Scopes had just completed his first year of teaching at the Dayton high school and became the defendant for the trial. Clarence Darrow defended Scopes and William Jennings Bryan, former secretary of state, led the prosecution. The trial itself was heated, especially between the prosecution and defense teams. Coverage for the trial abounded, and it soon became known as the "Monkey Trial" courtesy of H.L. Mencken. The trial went beyond the law, and it became a battle between creationists and evolutionists. Eventually Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100, but the decision was revised by the Tennessee Supreme Court. This case led to the suppression of evolution teaching across much of the South.²⁸ Mencken's response to the Scopes Trial was therefore predictable, as he wrote. "On the one side was bigotry, ignorance, hatred, superstition, every sort of blackness that the human mind is capable of. On the other side was sense. And sense achieved a great victory."²⁹ According to Shapiro, Mencken "described the Tennessee fundamentalists as 'morons,' 'yokels,' 'gaping primates,' and an 'anthropoid rabble' led by a band of 'gibbering baboons.'³⁰ Mencken's deeply

²⁸ William E Ellis, "Scopes Trial," In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 10: Law and Politics*, edited by James W Ely. and Bradley G Bond., by Wilson Charles Reagan, 123-26. University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

²⁹ "The Scopes Trial: Aftermath," in *American Decades Primary Sources*, 2004.

³⁰ Edward Shapiro, "The Southern Agrarians, H.L. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity." *American Studies* 13 (2), 1972, 77.

unflattering depiction of the South in his trial reports was embraced by the North. Sinclair Lewis even dedicated *Elmer Gantry*, his novel regarding ignorant and problematic religious fundamentalism, to Mencken. Predictably, Mencken's statements were resented throughout the South.³¹ *The New York Times* covered the trial throughout its duration, but when people first began to arrive in Dayton the paper wrote:

People have come from all over the South to Dayton. What they hope to get out of it is a problem. One negro drifted in from Georgia today, having got leave from his employer to come here and work for his employer's relatives for the duration of the trial. He wanted to see the show. One or two women, with obvious mental irregularities of a religious tendency, have come to town, and chatter volubly to anyone who will listen to them. A man who calls himself the greatest authority on the Bible, proclaimed by a large sign on his back on which is printed inversions of Bible phrases, trots up and down indefatigably. He is willing to exhort anybody at any time on any subject...Whatever the deep significance of this trial, if it has any, there is no doubt that it has attracted some of the world's champion freaks.³²

This news article clearly aligned with Mencken's views of the South, indicating that the negative view of the region was not restrained to only cultural critics, but across the nation. Furthermore, it is interesting that a newspaper would publish something as clearly bias as this. Both real newspapers and FTP living newspapers are overwhelmingly in support of the Northern hegemon.

As the South continued to come under attack from Mencken and his contemporaries as backwards bumpkins, especially after the *Scopes* trial, Southerners

³¹ Ibid.

³² Special to *The New York Times*. "Dayton Keyed Up For Opening Today of Trial of Scopes: Intense Excitement Grips Town as Principals Reach Scene of Battle on Evolution. Judge Gives His Attitude Says He Wants Inquiry for 'Eternal Truth' and Warns Against Personal Ambitions. State's Case to be Brief Defense Will Then Produce Scientists and Educators -- Catholics Offer Help to Bryan." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Jul 10, 1925.

attempted to curb the scathing remarks about the South. Edward S. Shapiro posits that the Southern agrarians and fundamentalists wanted to clear the image of the South, and thus restore their own perceptions of self, while others accepted the image thrust upon them by the Northern intellectuals.

In *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, a manifesto from southern pastorals, it was argued that the religious and rural qualities of the South should be lauded rather than diminished, for it is these aspects that make the South a unique place. In fact, "according to the Agrarians, it was the industrial and urban North with her spirit of mechanistic progress, material aggrandizement, and secularism, which was the cultural aberration and in need of the type of criticism which up to then had been mistakenly directed at the South."³³ As a reaction against this perceived Northern hostility, relations between North and South worsened. The view of the South that was popular during this time was that its inhabitants were uneducated, unwilling to change, racist, and poverty stricken. Though this was vehemently contested by Southern agrarians and intellectuals alike, these arguments were ignored by the North. The desire of the South to redeem the Southern image led to the beginnings of the Southern Renaissance, though these efforts did not influence the Northern hegemonic view of the region.

The most obvious of these is the concept of Southern racism. The North viewed the South as racist for many obvious reasons. Among these are the history of slavery, the lingering hostility towards black people, government-sanctioned discrimination, and the prevalence of overt, racially motivated crime. Though the North at this time had its own

³³ Ibid., 79.

racist tendencies, the overt and abundant nature of such behaviors in the South allowed the North to use this as a way to other the South.

Another construct of the South is that it was a rural region lacking in urban culture. Because a large portion of Southerners were agriculturalists, it was believed that there was little to no culture. It seemed as though there were very few urban hotspots, and even these were lacking in refinement. This is also seen in the religiosity of Southerners. They were often seen as illogical and backwards which also contributes to the concept of the uneducated South.

A large belief about the South was that its people were uneducated, which is linked back to the ruralness of the region. While this goes further back than Mencken, he illustrates the belief well in his aforementioned “Sahara of the Bozart” when he states that the region is dried up for creativity or anything in the realm of intellectualism. As Shapiro states:

Throughout the 1920's Northern journalists and social scientists pictured the South as a land of bigoted clergy, degraded sharecroppers and Ku Klux Klan supporters. Edwin Mims, Virginius Dabney and other Southern liberals countered by stressing the rapid economic, social and intellectual progress the South had experienced since the Civil War. Other Southerners accepted the validity of the benighted image, believing the amelioration of the South's economic and social conditions depended upon a frank recognition of the South's short comings. The Southern Agrarians, however, warmly defended the agrarianism, religiosity and conservatism of the South, traits which had been the most derided by the South's critics.³⁴

This lack of intellectualism became a defining trait in the Northern construction of the South.

Another important element of this construction was that the people of the South were poverty stricken. This is of course linked to the other perceptions of the South that

³⁴ Shapiro, 75-6.

have been detailed, particularly the idea that the region is largely rural. During this time in American history the cycle of poverty was not truly recognized or understood; those stuck within it were seen as simply lazy or unwilling to do anything to change their situation, which leads into the concept that Southerners were lazy and fine to continue life as they had been.

The strained relationship between the North and South throughout American history led to differences in culture, economy, morals, and society. The animosity between the two regions would affect their perceptions of each other well into the 20th century. The North had strong and definite views on the South and its people which was illustrated and reinforced through theatre.

CHAPTER THREE

New York Unit Living Newspapers

Introduction

This chapter examines the early works written by the New York Unit that created a Southern identity from a Northern perspective. By looking at the following three plays, *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936), *Power* (1937), and the unproduced *The South* (1936), the ideas put forth by Mencken, Cobb, Shapiro, and others are made clear. All three of these plays were written by the New York Unit; they provide a comprehensive overview of the artificially constructed image of the South, influenced by the Northern set of criteria. Within these works, Southerners are often depicted as uneducated, impoverished, rural, unwilling to change, and racist in these texts.

Triple-A Plowed Under

The first major living newspaper produced was *Triple-A Plowed Under*. This play shows the issues facing farmers, specifically the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA; 1933) and how it impacted these people. The AAA was a New Deal program that was intended to promote general economic recovery by promoting farm recovery. The ideal outcome of this was to bring back the purchasing power of 1909-1914. It also established “a crop loan and storage program,” called the Commodity Credit Corporation which “was established to make price-supporting loans and purchases of specific commodities.”¹

¹ “Agricultural Adjustment Administration,” Encyclopedia Britannica, Dec 3, 2019.

In order to achieve this, fewer goods were produced, surplus was exported, and the price of goods was raised. Likewise, it established the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which would incorporate a “domestic allotment” plan. This plan provided money in exchange for the farmers agreeing to produce fewer crops.²

During its existence, the AAA faced scrutiny which intensified when the Federal Theatre was working on *Triple-A Plowed Under*. As scholar Ann Folino White states in her book, *Plowed Under*, “At the time of the writing, rehearsals, and productions of *Triple-A Plowed Under*, public debate about the political, moral, and economic wisdom the Agricultural Adjustment Act had reached a fever pitch.”³ Additionally, two months prior to the premiere the Supreme Court ruled against the federal government in *United States v. Butler*. This case declared that the federal government was attempting to regulate and control agriculture with the AAA; this was a right reserved to the states by the Tenth Amendment and therefore unconstitutional.⁴ Due to this ruling, the federal government could not force states to enact the AAA.

Premiering March 14, 1936, at the Biltmore Theatre and written by the staff of the living newspaper unit in New York City (with oversight by Arthur Arent) *Triple-A Plowed Under* was the first living newspaper by the Federal Theatre to be publicly attended (after the first attempt of *Ethiopia* was shut down five weeks prior.)

² Ibid.

³ Ann Folino White, “Staging the Agricultural Adjustment Act The Federal Theatre Project’s Triple-A Plowed Under (1936),” in *Plowed Under*, 197.

⁴ “United States v. Butler.” Oyez. Accessed December, 2019.

Furthermore, it was staged within two weeks of Roosevelt signing the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act in order to replace the AAA. *Triple-A Plowed Under* was one of the most successful of the Project and was subsequently produced four more times between April and August of 1936 by theatres in major cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee.⁵

Triple-A details the predicament of American farmers during the Great Depression, with specific focus placed on the Midwest and Dust Bowl regions. The play spans the years between 1921 and 1936 over the course of thirty-six scenes. Overall, the AAA is featured in a positive light. The first three scenes provide historical context through detailing the predicament of the agricultural community during the years of inflation and deflation since the boom of the early 20s. The subsequent seven scenes detail the plight of contemporaneous agriculturalists, particularly the effects of inflation and the attempts to organize relief through the development of labor unions and strikes. Additionally, Mike Reno, who was the actual leader of the Farm Holiday Association (FHA) and the individual on whom the farmers pinned their hopes for obtaining relief from the federal government, is introduced. The Agricultural Adjustment Act is implemented in the next scene, to which the majority of farmers react positively. The ensuing scenes see Reno turning his back on the farmers, strikes, a farm auction, and an interaction between a rural and urban family. Scenes eleven through twenty-two dramatize the implementation and effects of the AAA on rural and urban communities. This section sees a wheat pit where wheat stocks are exchanged and sold, a drought, a

⁵ White, 197.

church service, a black farmer, sharecroppers, and a strike on meat purchases as a response to high prices. Scene twenty-three relates that the AAA has been deemed unconstitutional and will not continue. Scene twenty-four details that the processing tax was to be returned to the processors, who many people viewed as the middleman, rather than to the farmers.⁶ In scene twenty-five Chester A. Davis, administrator of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, announces that he is looking for a way to replace the AAA and one of the reporters suggest that they utilize the Soil Conservation Act that was passed the year prior. The scene closes with Davis gathering his Planning Board to make the SCA work in favor of the farmers. The finale features several characters from the previous scenes coming together to demand food, a decent standard of living, and the assistance to achieve these things in the form of a Farm-Labor Party. The show closes with a call to action for the audience to help achieve these goals.

As noted by White, “The play argued that the solution to hunger in capitalist America was farmer-consumer connectedness facilitated by the federal government.”⁷ This play placed New Deal food policies under moral scrutiny; it demanded that the government “regulat[e] an amoral economy and immoral “middlemen” in the interest of restoring each citizen’s “opportunity to make his own place in society.”⁸ Though it had the potential to be controversial, it was generally well-received, especially by the agrarian

⁶ Prior to the revocation of the AAA, the funds from these taxes were being distributed to the farmers. Within the play, Secretary Wallace deemed this to be “probably the greatest legalized steal in American history!”; *Triple-A Plowed Under*, 63.

⁷ White, 198.

⁸ White, 199.

community. *The New York Times* reported that “On the whole, it is theatrically effective-- a dramatic story honestly retold,” and that “the Living Newspaper must be credited with a pretty sensational beat.”⁹

Triple-A Plowed Under devotes most of its script to Midwestern farmers. Scenes nineteen and twenty are specifically set in the South and feature some of the criteria for Southern identity set forth by Mencken, Shapiro, and others. Scene nineteen features a black farmer named Sam who has just purchased a mule, who he has named “Guv’ment.” He soon runs into the sheriff that tells him that he cannot keep the mule because he still owes taxes. When Sam specifically asks how much he has in taxes, the sheriff tells him “What’s the difference what you owe, Sam, you ain’t agoin’ to pay it.” The scene ends with the sheriff taking away Sam’s mule.

The racism prevalent in the South during this time is evident throughout the interaction between Sam and the Sheriff. Additionally, the language the sheriff uses is condescending; he speaks to Sam about his inability to own a mule in a very pedantic way. This is reminiscent of Anderson’s discussion of print media, specifically the concept of languages of power. The hegemonic language within this scene is that of the sheriff, whose language is favored over the vernacular that Sam uses. The sheriff also does not fully explain to Sam, or the audience, exactly why Sam would be unable to pay his taxes. The line “what’s the difference what you owe, Sam, you ain’t agoin’ to pay it” demonstrates this clearly and makes the audience somewhat suspect of the sheriff and his intentions. What is equally concerning is the revelation that this is not the first time a

⁹ John E. Vacha, “The Federal Theatre’s Living Newspapers: New York’s Docudramas of the Thirties,” *New York History* 67, no. 1 (1986): 71.

mule has been taken away from Sam, demonstrating that this is a systemic issue. Furthermore, the scene presents the idea that Southern government workers are ineffective and cold-hearted; the sheriff is not working for the good of the people, nor is he properly enforcing the law, thus echoing Mencken.

Finally, this scene clearly addresses the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South at this time. Not only were their governmental rights significantly constrained, they were left with very few options to better themselves. This is clearly an allusion to the American governmental programs in which Sam has put his trust. However, he is stripped of his mule (the programs) that are supposed to enable him to achieve more. Additionally, the mule could be a stand in for the rights of the African American people, granted them by the federal government, but stripped away in the South by lawmakers and enforcers without good reason. The overwhelming racism in the scene is matched by the illustration of systemic poverty in the South. It is clear to the viewers that Sam will remain in this cycle of poverty without the benefits that the government provides (i.e. the mule.) Many of the issues facing Southerners at this time, as depicted in this play, are due to systemic racism that was reinforced by white Southerners. The final Northern criteria that this scene fulfills in the idea that Southerners are uneducated. This is most clearly expressed through an analysis of diction and language as explored in a later section.

This scene is additionally layered because of the historical promise of forty acres and a mule. After the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman created Special Order 15, which set aside confiscated Confederate land on the Southeast coast for free people so that “each family shall have a plot of not more than forty acres of tillable

ground,” and in some cases, people would also receive mules. President Andrew Johnson, however, reversed Sherman’s Order and the land was returned to the original Confederate owners. This left African American people with few choices, with most becoming sharecroppers for the former slaveholders.¹⁰ Not only is the surface reading of this scene racist, it shows the cyclical nature of racism in the South; the recompense that Black people were to receive to improve their lives was taken away from them, just as the mule was taken from Sam. The choice to use a mule makes this connection especially pointed and impactful. This scene clearly illustrates the racism, poverty, and the stigma of being uneducated in the South as highlighted by Mencken, Shapiro, and Cobb.

What makes Scene Nineteen especially fascinating is the fact that it was not used during the New York City production. According to director Joseph Losey, “We did not use this scene as it was impossible to get actors to play it with the necessary simplicity. The scene is conceived to be played entirely without props, with vaudeville technique, but not to be played up or plugged. If this scene is to be used, it should be played in front of a cyclorama framed with blacks, and the subsequent Sharecropper Scene, should be played in front of blacks.”¹¹

Scene twenty is set on a plantation farmed by a group of sharecroppers. The farmer tells his sharecroppers that he has to let them go because he is no longer growing

¹⁰ Sarah McCamon, “The Story Behind ‘40 Acres and a Mule,’” *All Things Considered*. Podcast audio, January 12, 2015.

¹¹ ‘Blacks’ is a common stage term used to refer to black curtains; Editorial Staff of the Living Newspaper, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, Federal Theatre Project Material Collections George Mason. Federal Theatre Project Material Collections George Mason University

cotton. When the sharecroppers ask if he is being paid for not growing cotton, as happened with the AAA, and if they are therefore not owed some of the money, the farmer responds with “Since when you croppers started figgerin’? You git you' stuff together and git. The Guv'ment ain't wantin' me to plant the land you been workin'.”¹² When the sharecroppers tell him that he is required to pay them for their work, he responds by declaring that the sharecroppers owe him payment, he will overlook this provided they leave his property. After this, one of the sharecroppers rallies the rest of his compatriots in order to get them to join a union in order to negotiate steady pay for their work.

The Northern criteria for Southern identity that this scene demonstrates is the uneducated and impoverished nature of Southerners, which is expressed in Mencken’s critique of the region. The specific setting of the scene is particularly important for understanding the construction of Southern identity within these living newspapers. The fact that it is specified as being set on a plantation reinforces the Northern idea of a racist South and the concept of the region's "negro problem" as it calls to mind the history of slavery. Moreover, this scene demonstrates that white Southerners also face an unjust system and a cycle of poverty created by sharecropping from which it is difficult to escape. Not only can they not afford their own land on which to farm, the landlord is hoarding the money that he is supposed to give to his tenants in exchange for not farming the land according to the AAA stipulations. The implication that the AAA, a Northern bill meant to help the tenants, is being ignored or abused by the landowner portrays the image of an immoral and ineffective government and system of power within the South.

¹² Ibid., 52.

The efforts to unionize at the end of the scene serves as a call to the audience, an element common in the works of the FTP, as well as a clear implication that the North is superior. In essence, the poor tenant farmers can improve their situation by educating themselves and forcing change through embracing the Northern power structure of the labor union. Because the South was seen as a largely agrarian society despite the various urban centers, the idea that the majority of its citizens would face this issue was a common Northern misunderstanding.

Power

Power was one of the most popular and influential living newspapers of the FTP. It is credited to Arthur Arent and first premiered at the Ritz Theatre in New York City on February 23, 1937. It achieved both critical and financial success in New York, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and Portland. *Power* made such an impact on the audience and reputation of the Federal Theatre that its controversial nature was referenced when Hallie Flanagan was questioned during the HUAC trial, trying to root out that communism was at the heart of the Federal Theatre.¹³ When *Power* opened it was in the midst of the national debate over who owned electric utilities. Which led to both the popularity and controversial nature of the production. It was especially popular in Seattle, for the city had been having its own public-versus-private debate between the public City Light and private Puget Power. The editorial slant of this living newspaper is made clear through its overt support of the government's Tennessee Valley Authority.

¹³ Eisen, Kurt. "Circulating "Power:" National Theatre as Public Utility in the Federal Theatre Project." *Theatre Symposium* 9, (Jan 01, 2001): 37, 38.

Power addresses the concept of government-controlled entities versus privately held corporations, particularly in the arena of utilities. The main focus of this debate is the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). According to Barry Witham,

Power argued for public ownership in a panorama of highly theatrical scenes which depicted how electricity had been co-opted by private interests and business trusts. The play dramatized the plight of rural farmers who were ignored by the private companies of urban dwellers who were victims of price fixing and fraud. In addition, it exposed the abuses of the holding companies who had threatened, bullied and blackmailed their way into a virtual monopoly of what *Power* claimed was a natural right of all citizens.¹⁴

Part of the reason why this play became so controversial was because the topic of private versus public ownership of power was a huge debate during the 30s, some of the most notable being those that involved the TVA, especially the ones with the Tennessee Electric Power Company (TEPCO).

The historical context of the play is important to have a thorough understanding of the piece. For many citizens of the Tennessee Valley and the greater South, numerous private companies either cost too much or they required the client to pay for the equipment needed to deliver the electricity, such as electrical poles. Because of this, many people turned to the government for money so that they could create their own power plant that could serve the area at a reasonable price. President Roosevelt felt that it would be advantageous for the average consumer to have access to hydroelectric power, which would be produced by the Wilson Dam. The Private Tennessee Electric Power Company objected to this, however, saying that the cheap power produced by the TVA put them at an unfair advantage. Additionally, it was argued that this allowed for the government to infiltrate the private sector, socializing the utilities field. The private

¹⁴ Witham, 79.

companies that once had virtual monopolies, were now fighting small communities who were forming themselves into municipal Public Utilities Districts in order to buy electricity from the government at a lower rate than they would receive from the private sector. In addition, within the larger cities, the government further infringed upon the private companies by threatening to run parallel utility lines, forcing them to bend to the government. The opposing sides argued over the issue with those in favor of government interference claiming that the TEPCO had a monopoly on power and those in favor of private corporations insisting that the government actions were communist.¹⁵ These disputes also meant that court cases were frequent- there was the possibility of an injunction at any moment. Though the struggle to attain affordable and accessible electricity affected citizens throughout the country, *Power* is heavily focused on the agrarian South. Overall, the play demonstrates multiple criteria of the Southern identity as set forth by Mencken, Shapiro, Cobb and others.

Power begins as most FTP living newspapers- with the Voice of the Loudspeaker describing the issue that this play will address: electricity. The following scenes detail the history of how electricity from its earliest discovery up to the form of power known to the audience. Following the history are various scenes detailing the consumer rates and setting up the call to action/argument of the play. From here there are scenes of electric expansion, the cost of electricity, and how the private companies bully, manipulate, and undermine consumers. From this early on, the living newspaper gives the moral stronghold to public sectors. Following this, there are scenes of a holding company, how electricity is created, and why the government should step in. Scene nine has to do with

¹⁵ Witham, 79-80.

consumer-investor relationships, followed by price comparisons between 1913 and 1926 for various goods, specifically noting how much the price for electricity has gone up. Throughout this, consumers demand lower rates and discuss municipal ownership. In scene fifteen the Tennessee Valley makes its first appearance, where the area and the needs for affordable rural electrification are made clear. Scene 15-E closes out the first act, and features an announcement of the government stepping in to bring electricity to everyone in the area in the form of the TVA.

The first scene of Act Two features a group of small town businessmen creating a municipal Public Utilities District, with the following scene doing the same except with a group of farmers. Scenes three and four feature the private company trying to get the upper hand by bullying, manipulating and undermining, though they are not well received. Throughout this latter half the arguments that exist between the public and private companies come to the forefront. Scene six details the interest that the TVA (and it's legal battles) have created across the country. Throughout this scene the audience sees people arguing about the constitutionality of the TVA. It is clear here that the writers of this piece see electricity as a basic human right like the air we breathe. The living newspaper ends uncertainty, as the court battles/injunctions that it depicts were still unsettled. To effectively illustrate this uncertainty, a question mark was projected on the scrim at the close of each performance.

With a spotlight on electricity and rural electrification, specifically public versus private utility companies, this play focuses on the general population of American citizens across the country; however, the South enters the text when discussion of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) emerges toward the second half of the play. When the

South is introduced in this work, the overt characterization is decidedly Northern. Here the people of the South are depicted with a low quality of life and are shown to make no attempts toward self-improvement. The text states:

In the Tennessee Valley... parts of seven States, 40,000 square miles, two million people. All living in a region blighted by the misuse of land... In these cabins, life has changed but little since some pioneer wagon broke down a century ago, and for them this became the promised land. Occupations— when they exist at all—are primitive, a throwback to an earlier America. Here stand the results of poor land, limited diet, insufficient schooling, inadequate medical care, no plumbing, industry, agriculture or electrification!¹⁶

These words are markedly similar to those of H.L. Mencken in his “Sahara of the Bozart,” in which he said the South and its people were dried up creatively and culturally, and that if the region were to be washed away it would not be a loss:

And yet, for all its size and all its wealth and all the “progress” it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert. There are single acres in Europe that house more first-rate men than all the states south of the Potomac; there are probably single square miles in America. If the whole of the late Confederacy were to be engulfed by a tidal wave tomorrow, the effect upon the civilized minority of men in the world would be but little greater than that of a flood on the Yang-tse-kiang. It would be impossible in all history to match so complete a drying-up of a civilization.¹⁷

These passages have similar themes and styles, in addition to the overlapping criticism of the South. Both present an image of the region as blighted. There is an almost apocalyptic tone to the description of the South through the references to natural disaster and misused land. Additionally, the passages speak to the northern conception of the south as a place significantly lacking in culture and progress, as well as intellectual development. The

¹⁶ *Power*, 61.

¹⁷ H.L. Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” *The American Scene: A Reader*, Alfred A Knopf: New York, 1977, 157-158.

overall impression provided by both Mencken and the FTP is that the South is a barren wasteland, a society stuck in a primitive past with no hope for the future. Like the other FTP living newspapers about the South, the North is depicted as being populated by people who are well-educated and willing to fight for what they need, while the South is populated by people who are unintelligent and unwilling to fight to change their circumstances. The entirety of Act Two is set in the South; most scenes are set in Tennessee and some in Georgia, while statesmen from Alabama and Mississippi are mentioned in the final scene. The first time the audience is introduced to Southern characters is in Scene Fifteen-A, which depicts a conversation between a Southern farmer and his wife. He is struggling to read by kerosene light, and she attempts to persuade him to try and get electricity for their farm. At first glance, this scene seems nondescript and entirely unspecific to the South. Upon closer inspection however, this is clearly not the case. First, the lines between the farmer and his wife are written in a Southern vernacular, or as the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project calls it, Southern American English. For example:

FARMER: Same light I been usin' for the last twenty years.

WIFE: Yeah, and look at you now. Them glasses are thick enough to fry eggs under if we ever got any sun in this dump!¹⁸

This is especially important to note within these living newspapers from the Federal Theatre because no other group is written in dialect, making it a marker of Southernness. This issue of dialect comes back to Anderson's languages of power and a vernacular hierarchy. Not only does a distinctly Southern dialect 'other' these characters, it

¹⁸ *Power*, 62.

disenfranchises them from the rest of the country because they are not utilizing the language of power. Rather this accent puts those with it at a lower level in vernacular hierarchy. This not only serves to isolate people from the South, but it further puts them under a Northern hegemon. This reinforces the often-incorrect assumption that the general population of the South is unintelligent. Though there is nothing within the play that concretely demonstrates a lack of intelligence on the part of the farmer and/or his wife, the use of this dialect subtly implies their mental or educational inferiority. It is also important to note that the Southerners are the only characters within this play that are written with dialect. Thus, though this may not have been the intent, Arent's utilization of a Southern regional dialect impacts the audience's interpretation of these characters.

Later in the same scene, as the wife tries to persuade her husband to take action, he says "Andy Jackson used a lamp like this, Nora."¹⁹ The reference to Andrew Jackson is interesting for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Jackson was a Southerner who relocated to the region past the Appalachians that would come to be known as Tennessee, the same general location as the farmer. Secondly, during his time in office, Jackson was often depicted as a representation of the common man. Jackson was also notoriously anti-establishment, anti-intellectual, rural (his nickname of Old Hickory testifies to that); also, under Jackson, politics became increasingly democratic. Jackson was a self-made man, "of strong will and courage, he personified for many citizens the vast power of nature and Providence, on the one hand, and the majesty of the people, on the other. His very weaknesses, such as a nearly uncontrollable temper, were political strengths. Opponents

¹⁹ *Power*, 62.

who branded him an enemy of property and order only gave credence to the claim of Jackson's supporters that he stood for the poor against the rich, the plain people against the interests."²⁰ With this in mind, it makes sense that the average farmer would look up to Jackson as a representation of accomplishment. The view of Jackson that is often promoted is something that appealed to the average citizen, but especially the regular rural person with hopes to get further along. Jackson stood for everything this farmer believes in. Additionally, while Jackson was the direct representation of the common man who had achieved success and attained power, the farmer is the direct representation of the common man who is still struggling in the world.

Nora, the wife, finally succeeds in convincing her husband to try again when she inspires him with his American-ness and his love for Andrew Jackson.²¹ What is perhaps most notable in this scene is that when Nora finally succeeds in invigorating her husband, it is by reminding him that he is an American citizen. This attempt to align the South with the rest of the country stands in direct opposition to the historically fractious nature between North and South. This is interesting because in the other living newspapers featuring the South, there is a clear division between the North and South, so much so that it divides the country in a cultural fashion. *Power*, however, explores delineation between Southerners. That is to say, rather than an apparent separation between Northerners and Southerners there is a separation between Southern people. The focus is on the difference between agrarian and cosmopolitan life within the South. For example, the farmer's wife mentions fans, heaters, vacuums, and dishwashers, things which are

²⁰ Karl Patterson Schmidt, Wilbur Zelinsky, and Others. "Jacksonian Democracy." Encyclopædia Britannica.

²¹ *Power*, 63.

viewed as simple home amenities for urban people but are out of the reach of the agrarian characters.

The following scene, Fifteen-B, features a city man and his wife who have electricity but pay a higher rate than is fair. This scene is also a mirror of the previous because the wife attempts to convince her husband to confront the State Electric Commission about prices being too high. Scenes 15- A&B contrast an urban South with an agrarian one. Though the city dwellers appear to be better off than the rural couple, they are in fact facing similar struggles. However, despite their similarities, the couples also demonstrate the cultural divide between rural and urban communities within the South through the lack of Southern dialect. As indicated, though the city dweller and his wife are Southern, they do not have markers of Southernness. The overall stereotype of the South that has been created is largely agrarian, yet this scene specifically portrays an urban area of the South. This inclusion challenges the agrarian stereotype of the South. In essence, the playwrights reinforce the Northern conception of the South as a rural society while simultaneously demonstrating the fallacy of the stereotype.

As the play continues into Act Two, the audience is introduced to several more scenes featuring the South. The second act focuses on the conflict between the price-gouging and exclusionary private electric companies and the government-run Tennessee Valley Authority. During the final scenes the private power company tries to supply electricity to people throughout the South. All of the subscenes in Scene 4 are short and depict the reactions of Southerners to the private power company attempting to finally provide the previously withheld electricity. Scene B depicts an old woman who actively

tries to shoot the linemen because they work for a private power corporation.²² This serves to illustrate the supposed hostility of Southern people toward things that would help them to better their way of life.

In the following scene, Four-C, two linemen arrive at the home of a black farmer and trick him into signing up with their company, despite the fact that he was already receiving electricity from TVA, by telling him that the two companies had merged. Not only are the two men deceitful, they also appear to be racist because they consistently refer to the old man as “Uncle.” which is a clear reference to Uncle Tom. Though suspicious, he puts his trust in the linemen and agrees to sign the contract, saying “Guess it’s all right. Guess you wouldn’t fool an old man like me...Where do I sign?”²³ This clearly illustrates the unfavorable Uncle Tom type that is derided and abhorred by African Americans. Additionally, it generally portrays the South in a negative light. Not only is the man depicted as foolish and overly obliging, but the linemen are deceptive. In the final subscene of Scene Four, Scene D, two linemen set up a power line and are quickly chased out by a group of people who proceed to chop down the power line because they do not want their electricity from this private company. This scene depicts Southerners as violent and destructive, without regard for property.

The final instance of the private power company attempting to gain customers is Scene 4-A. Two linesmen enter a farmer’s land to put up power lines and the farmer replies: “So that’s what it is! Five years ago when I went down there and got down on my

²² Ibid, 77.

²³ Ibid, 78.

hands and knees beggin' 'em for lights they wouldn't give 'em to me. Now they're tryin' to sneak 'em in on me!... Well, you go back there and tell 'em now I don't want it! The Government's takin' care of me now! *The United States Government!* D'you hear that! Now go on and git! Go on, before I sick the dog on you! Git!"²⁴ This dialogue is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it shows the stereotypical stubbornness and pride of Southern people. He no longer wants electricity from this company because it scorned him in the past. The second thing to note is the indication that Southerners are not wary or suspicious of the government like they are often portrayed in other federal theatre works. As is seen in other living newspapers, there is a clear division or hostility between the North and South, but that is not the case here. Although *Power* often shows Southerners in a stereotypical fashion, ultimately the play acknowledges that despite the regional differences, the South is still a part of the whole of America and its citizens should support the TVA. This detail sets *Power* apart from the other living newspapers that feature the South. Though there are still several Southern stereotypes depicted within this play, Arent and his team have constructed the South comparative graciousness. The entirety of American citizenry, including Southerners, are depicted as victims of private, capitalist companies; Southerners are not necessarily worse off than people of other areas of the country. The main difference between *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Power* is that they were actually produced whereas the next play discussed in this chapter, *The South*, never received a production.

²⁴ Ibid, 76.

The South

The South was one of the first living newspapers to be written for the Federal Theatre Project and, similar to *Ethiopia*, went unproduced. This is because after the *Ethiopia* incident, it was decided by those in charge of the unit that the content was too political and could cause another immense round of backlash, which would reflect poorly upon the FTP and the project would have faced further censorship.²⁵ It was written in 1936 by the playwrights of the New York unit at the behest of Elmer Rice, in an effort to “expose the common practice of lynching negroes and also the plight of the sharecroppers.” Featuring twelve scenes beginning with the Emancipation Proclamation and ending with Angelo Herndon’s fight against capitalism, this play was largely focused on the plight of African Americans in the South. However, the piece was no longer worked on after Elmer Rice’s departure from the Project. Additionally, it was deemed too politically focused and was censored, with pieces of it eventually being used in *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Power*.²⁶ It has been additionally suggested by Elmer Rice that the radical *The South* was the actual reason for the swift acceptance of his dismissal and censorship of *Ethiopia*. According to Rice;

The final decision to censor the Living Newspaper and thereby force my resignation did not come until after I had outlined to Mr. Baker some of the other productions which were being planned. These include a play called *Class of '29* which deals realistically with unemployment and the handling of relief; and a second issue of the Living Newspaper on the situation in the Southern States, touching on such vital subjects as lynching, discrimination against negroes and the plight of the sharecroppers (in other words, hitting the Democratic Party where it lives). Mr.

²⁵ Cecelia Moore, *The Federal Theatre Project in the American South: The Carolina Playmakers and the Quest for American Drama*. Lanham: Lexington Books. 2017.

²⁶ Moore, 139.

Baker has already called off one Federal Theatre Project play in Chicago, because in the opinion of Mayor Kelly it was uncomplimentary to the Administration and the Democratic Party. In short, we are confronted here not only with an evidence of the growth of fascism which always uses censorship as one of its most effective weapons, but with the resolute determination of the Democratic Party to be re-elected at all costs.²⁷

Though Rice's comments were largely ignored, his ideas are not totally implausible. As Stuart Cosgrove points out, "it seems highly unlikely that a relief unit, working under strict economic budgets, would choose to ignore a play that they had already prepared for rehearsal and leave their cast idle. The decision throws more doubt on the relationship between the Unit and the W.P.A. hierarchy, and perhaps lends more weight to Elmer Rice's claim that it was *The South* and not *Ethiopia* which posed the real political threat to Washington."²⁸ Whether this is the case or not, it is clear that the race issues in *The South* would create too much controversy for the Federal Theatre.

The South focuses on specific events in Southern history rather than the experiences of the 'average Southern person.' The living newspaper begins with a delivery of The Emancipation Proclamation by the character of Abraham Lincoln. Scene two is broken into six subscenes, which detail portions of the various trials of the Scottsboro Boys.²⁹ Scene three focuses on demagogic politician Huey Long, Governor of

²⁷ "Statement on Resignation," *New Theatre*, February 1936, p. 2.

²⁸ Cosgrove, 54.

²⁹ The Scottsboro Boys were riding a Southern Railroad train illegally in search of work. On March 25, 1931 a racially charged fight broke out among the Boys and a group of white male passengers. When the train reached its next stop at Paint Rock Alabama the train was evacuated, and the nine men were arrested. In order to avoid arrest for vagrancy and possible prostitution, two women, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, claimed that they had been gangraped by the group of black men. To avoid a lynching, a swift trial was scheduled. The nine men received inept legal counsel and faced an all-white jury. All of the Boys were found guilty, with eight of the nine receiving the death penalty. This caused an uproar across the nation for it was clear the group had been wrongfully

Louisiana and later member of the United States Senate until his assassination in 1935, an event which is detailed in the play. Scene four is about sharecroppers and the growth of their union. Scene 5 focuses on the TVA and the building of the Norris dam, along with praise for Roosevelt and the WPA. Much of this section was likely repurposed into *Power*. Labor is the focus of the following scene, which depicts chain gangs in the South. Though the character of Governor Talmadge declares that the inmates are glad to be a part of a chain gang, when the men themselves are on stage this is shown to be false.

Scene seven gives information about the unequal education funds for black and white school children; the white schools are funded significantly more. Scene eight deals with a group of suspected communists and the vigilante justice that they face, not for their political leanings, but rather their belief in race equality. Scene nine discusses an anti-lynching bill that most politicians are trying to get passed, except for white Southerners. Scene ten is focused mostly on the beliefs of Theodore G. Bilbo, a notorious white supremacist governor of Mississippi who would later be elected to the United States Senate. Scene eleven is a stylized and abbreviated version of Angelo Herndon's case of unlawful imprisonment. The finale is a continuation of scene eleven, with Angelo Herndon giving a final speech where all of the characters in the show stand on stage alongside Herndon.

convicted. The case was appealed, and the boys were defended by the International Labor Defense (ILD). The next several years would see various state and federal trials. Eventually five received long prison terms and four were quietly released during the 1940s. This case is notable for displaying the prejudices and injustices of the South. This trial was the first introduction many Americans had to Communist ideals (in the form of the ILD). This factor is especially important to note given the linkages between the FTP and communism; "Scottsboro Boys," in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, Credo Reference, 2013.

The South is an interesting study because it depicts a region rather than a single issue like living newspapers were known for doing. Additionally, instead of advocating for a solution to a specific problem it highlights the troubled nature of the region as a whole. Within this piece Mencken and Shapiro's references to lynching, poverty, lack of education, and independence from the North are apparent. Also, important to note is that many of these concepts are interconnected within this play; a group of intersectional issues is created. While this piece is supposed to be focused on lynching and sharecropping as per Rice's request, it is more about the race issues in the South, going beyond the problem of lynching. Thus, even though this play meets portions of the Northern criteria for what the South is, the main focuses of this work are racism and the systemic issues that led to these problems in the South

The most prevalent of these Northern stereotypes and depictions of the South is the racism of the people in the region. This is seen throughout the play by the active choice to focus on the plight of Black Americans in the region. The conservative, fundamentalist religions in the South were inherently racist in the way it impacted black people. It was these religions that were utilized as a tool for colonialism. This relates to the idea of 'White Man's Burden' wherein the colonizer is required to take care of the groups they have colonized. One of the common ways to do this was introduce Christianity to the group, believing that it would civilize people. Additionally, there are several instances of unequal schooling for white and black children, which Cobb relates in *The Brown Decision*, *Jim Crow*, and *Southern Identity* when he recalls watching

children go to segregated schools in his youth.³⁰ There were also several Jim Crow laws in effect in the South at this time, which put heavy restrictions on black people, relegating them to second-class citizens. Additionally, there was general bigotry and prejudice throughout the region.

One of the most overt acts of racism performed in the South was that of lynching and the lynch culture of the region. The North saw the overt act of lynching as symbolic of the racial discord and prejudices of the South. The extreme violence of such actions also provided a way to defer attention from the racial inequalities in the North as, by comparison, they did not seem as severe. As seen from Mencken, lynching was so commonplace in the South that people were nonplussed. One of the key elements of lynch culture in the South was that the practice was acceptable to many Southerners because it was how they defended the honor of Southern women. As Ida B. Wells-Barnett details in her research on lynching in her pamphlets *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* and *The Red Record*, the alleged rape of white women was often used in the South as an excuse to hide the real reasons for lynching a person of color, whether it be because of the advancement of black people, enforcing a subaltern class, or simply because the perpetrators felt threatened by black people. Additionally, lynch culture demonstrates the backwards identity of the South as seen by the North. Instead of relying on reason and order (the justice system) the people take the law into their own hands. It's also a form of an unwillingness to change. Lynching is an act which frequently occurred

³⁰ James C. Cobb, *The Brown Decision, Jim Crow, and Southern Identity*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005.

in Antebellum South, and the white Southerners within the living newspaper attempt to continue this form of vigilante justice.

The issues of racism and lynch culture, as well as other Southern stereotypes, are explored in *The South*. Lynch culture is specifically addressed in the theatricalization of the Scottsboro Boys events. Within the play, Sheriff Burleson declared that there will be no lynching: “Just because my men and I are Southerners, and these prisoners are negroes not not [sic] lend anyone to believe that we won’t do our duty. (emphatically) So long as we have a piece of ammunition and a man alive, these people will be protected.”³¹

Though Burleson and his men do not hold to racist beliefs, making this a much more nuanced view of the South rather than stereotypical, this scene does indicate that there was a widespread call for vigilante justice and lynching of these nine young men among the greater Southern population. This issue is brought up for a second time during scene nine where it appears as if a large number of Senate members are trying to pass anti-lynching legislation, but Senator Smith from South Carolina is vehemently opposed. As Senator Smith states, “Mr. President, I desire to make some observations about this bill. It is an open reflection upon the states where the proposed legislation is aimed to operate. Nothing to us is more dear than the sanctity and purity of our womanhood, and, so help us, God, no one shall violate it without paying the just penalty.”³² Not only does this showcase that Southern people had little issue with lynching, but it illustrates Southern values as well. Smith attempts to make lynching excusable because he believes that recompense is necessary for justice when a woman is no longer ‘pure.’ Though in this

³¹ *The South*, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 60.

instance the lynching culture of the South is linked to a flawed system of justice, the racism and hatred at the root of the issue is more complex.

Along with this lynch culture comes the Ku Klux Klan, which is referenced several times throughout the script along with other white supremacist groups. One of these instances is during the aforementioned scene when Clem says “Do you know that a band of forty masked night-riders fired upon the home of C.T. Carpenter, the attorney for our union? If they treat a white man like him that way, what are they going to do with us!”³³ The act of brutality often experienced by black people is also referenced throughout the show. The first instance of this is during the Scottsboro Boys trial scenes when they are described as entering the courtroom by the stage directions as “some of them bear signs of brutal beatings at the hands of Sheriff. (This is a known fact.)” Though the brutality faced by people within this play is linked to racism, it is not only experienced by black people, but also people who believed in and actively fought for equality. For instance, in scene 8-C when the group of alleged communists detail the flogging that they received at the hands of the police: “I screamed for help as I was being put into the car by the police. Passerby stopped and the police told them, ‘we’re taking a crazy man to Chattahoochee.’ At the warehouse they threw Shoemaker who was almost unconscious on top of me and drove us to a swamp 14 miles away. I’m just a Southern cracker and I’m pretty scared of what’s called constituted authority now.”³⁴

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Ibid., 55-6.

Other instances of racism within this living newspaper are seen by displays of bigotry and prejudice, brutality, and racial slurs such as “darkie.” One instance of this is in scene four when a manager of a company of plantation owners, Spellings, tries to swindle a black sharecropper, John, out of the money that is owed to him. Spellings tries to convince John that he owes the Company money for credit to the store and plowing the land before he moved onto it, when the audience is led to believe that John is being honest and the Company actually owes him money. Though racism is depicted blatantly, the script is far more compassionate to African Americans than to white Southerners.

Another criterion that this play utilizes is the idea that Southerners are unwilling to change. This is seen in the fact that they are oftentimes stuck in the past, as is referenced by Samuel Leibowitz, the defense for the Scottsboro trial in scene two:

I say that this is a black page in the history of American civilization. An occasion where once more, twelve citizens of Alabama, swayed by bigotry and prejudice and harkening to the yelps of bombastic Ku Klux who hurled mud at the Jew and the people of the great state of New York to sympathetic ears in a courtroom filled with lantern-jawed morons and lynchers, brought in a verdicts that was mockery of justice!... You must know this God-forsaken place, some of the creatures who live here. - the mobs that burn crosses at night, masked like cowards so that decent people can't see the sordidness and venom in their hideous faces, - in order to understand that the verdict here was nothing more than a piece of judicial lynching!³⁵

This unwillingness to change is also found in the inefficiency of the law, which is also often linked to the racism present in the region and is clarified by Leibowitz's remarks. This is illustrated during one of the scenes depicting the Scottsboro trials, wherein Ruby Bates admits that she gave false testimony, which was used to imprison the group of young men. The same issue is later seen when the group of communists are arrested, and

³⁵ Ibid., 7-8.

homes are searched without search warrants. It is revealed in the same scene, that “The grand jury formally indicts the six police and two Klansmen, on charges of murder, assault and kidnapping. They are held without bail.” However, three days later it was announced “Floggers released on \$7500 bail each.”³⁶

This unwillingness to change is also tied up with the idea that Southerners are uneducated, which is revealed through some of dictatorial Huey Long’s dialogue. “I’m the only Democrat left in the Senate in the sense that I’ll fight dictatorship... They call me a Fascist! Fine! I’m Mussolini and Hitler rolled into one. Mussolini gave them castor oil. I’ll give them tabasco. And then they’ll like Louisiana!”³⁷ About the laws he wants to pass Long states, “I know they are good laws and good for the state, because I conceived them, dictated them, and will now have them favorably acted upon.”³⁸

As mentioned above, another criteria of the North used to create the concept of a Southern identity is the uneducated nature of Southerners. There are multiple instances of obliviousness and poor manners throughout the script. When Long is talking about his “Share the wealth plan,” he cracks a peanut and eats it in front of the audience. In scene six when talking about the chain gangs that were a popular form of punishment in the South throughout the first half of the twentieth century, with Georgia being one of the last states to end the practice.³⁹ Governor Talmadge of Georgia tells reporter Joseph North

³⁶ Ibid., 57.

³⁷ Ibid., 14.

³⁸ Ibid., 15.

³⁹ Mitchel P. Roth, *Prisons and prison systems*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006, 56–57.

“The change in environment and work of the prison camps on the gang is one of the most humane ways to keep convicts. A good whipping in your own town or county would work better than detention for the smaller crimes like [indecipherable] and wife beating. I tell you, a man don’ want to sit cooped up in a dark dirty hole for his sins-- he wants to get out in the air-- and work!”⁴⁰

The widespread and often systemic poverty of the South is also demonstrated in this play. For instance, when the Scottsboro Boys enter the courtroom for the first time, they are described as “poorly dressed, wearing overalls, patched pants, torn shirts, etc.”⁴¹ Additionally, at a clandestine labor meeting in scene four, people have makeshift furniture and the barest of necessities. When Angelo Herndon is unlawfully arrested, the people of the International Labor Defense discuss having to raise the fifteen thousand dollars to bail him out of prison. In addition to owning few belongings, cheap labor and work performed by minors are mentioned. Sharecroppers are talked about as “a shiftless lot with only themselves to blame if they are not blessed with this world’s goods as they would like to be.”⁴² Additionally, Herndon says that he had to work in coal mines from the time that he was thirteen years old in order to maintain a living for himself and his family.

The final criteria is the independence of the South. This is to say that there was a clear separation and oftentimes a hostility between people of the South and the rest of the

⁴⁰ *The South*, 47.

⁴¹ *The South*, 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25.

country, especially the North. However, this is only mentioned briefly within the play. In scene four, about sharecropping and labor unions, Reverend J. Abner Sage says “And we’ve had a pretty serious situation here, what with these Northern agitators coming in.”⁴³ While this is a small detail, it is significant that the regionality of the agitators is brought up.

It is clear *The South* is at least trying to give a more nuanced view of the region and its residents even though the negative Northern stereotypes are depicted as well. *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Power* created almost a caricature of the southerners rather than making them authentic. The Northern writers of *The South*, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, and *Power* created caricatures of southerners and an overwhelmingly negative Southern identity. The next chapter will focus on a play that combines the structure of the Living Newspaper with the Southern tradition of folk drama. *King Cotton* features some of the romanticized elements common in Southern created media, such as the previously discussed *Gone With The Wind*, yet addresses the problematic aspects of the region as well. This combination provides a more nuanced view of *The South*.

⁴³ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Regional Unit at Chapel Hill and *King Cotton*

“Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all.”

-*Absolom, Absolom*, William Faulkner

Introduction

This chapter examines the regional living newspaper *King Cotton*, specifically its form and the construction of Southern identity within it. An understanding of the unit of the Federal Theatre Project at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill is necessary to understand these aspects of *King Cotton*. This particular location is significant because of the work in folk drama done by Professor Frederick Koch and Paul Green, and the group known as the Carolina Playmakers. By the 1930s, Koch's drama program was not only well known, but a good model for regional theatre produced in conjunction with the Federal Theatre. Four FTP dramatists came to Chapel Hill, two of which were Betty Smith and Robert V. Finch. The four writers were tasked to create a regional newspaper about the South that discussed cotton. What they came up with was the script for *King Cotton*, written with assistance from two of Koch's graduate students. Though the writers clearly acknowledge the issues prevalent within the region, the problems of the South are not the main focus of *King Cotton*. More importantly, this living newspaper was done in the style of the Southern tradition of folk drama, meaning that there was a melding of the two forms. This combination of two forms allowed for a unique perspective on both the Southern region of the country and the FTP living newspapers.

Chapel Hill and Folk Theatre

The Irish Players¹ group significantly influenced American Theatre, specifically the Little Theatre Movement which was affiliated with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Irish Players made extensive use of folk art in their work and this appealed to the American theatre practitioners that were exhausted by the productions of the commercialized stage. The first little theatres were founded in Chicago and Boston in 1912 in an effort to create non-commercialized work. Community and University theatres soon began creating little theatres of their own. There were, however, some pre-existing drama departments at universities scattered across the country. One of which was found in Chapel Hill, North Carolina

When Frederick Koch was teaching English at the University of North Dakota, he built up a group called the Dakota Playmakers. This group also had the ultimate goals of writing and producing their own plays. Koch decided he needed more training, and so he went to Harvard to receive his Masters in 1909. While there, he studied under professor George Pierce Baker who had begun a drama group at Harvard and in 1912 would create his 47 Workshop. Koch returned to teaching at UND with renewed vigor and in 1913 he was greatly inspired by the aforementioned Irish dramatists and their theatre of the people which featured “simple, elemental emotions and poetic colloquial speech, that led, naturally and inevitably, to the original ‘folk plays’ of North Dakota and later of North

¹ A theatrical touring group which followed W.B. Yeats, founder of the Abbey Theatre, to America in 1911. Jane De Hart Matthews supposes that this group was the catalyst for drama groups springing up across the United States; Matthews, 24.

Carolina.”² Koch’s time at North Dakota mirrored the coming years in North Carolina and his work with the Carolina Playmakers. After thirteen years of work at UND, Koch’s reputation preceded him and the head of the English department at Chapel Hill, Dr. Edwin Greenlaw, came to know of Koch’s work and he extended Koch an invitation to join the faculty. With rich material for writing and encouraging future dramatists, Koch accepted the position.³

At UNC, Professor Frederick Koch took the teachings of the Irish Players to heart and urged his students to gain inspiration from the traditions and history surrounding them. In 1919, Koch formed the Carolina Playmakers, a group that would stage plays on the UNC campus and throughout the rest of the state.⁴ This brought about numerous plays based on folk traditions and local history.⁵ “Koch urged his own students to write “folk plays” in the sense of the German “volk,” focusing on the legends, customs, language, and daily life of the common people. His emphasis on realistic subject matter led students to select topics outside “genteel” literary standards. Many of Koch’s students, including Paul Green, took as their subject the experiences of marginalized populations of the South, including African Americans and North Carolina Indians.”⁶ On

² Walter Spearman and Samuel Selden, *The Carolina Playmakers: The First Fifty Years*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ “Frederick Koch and the Carolina Playmakers,” *The Carolina Story: A Virtual Museum of University History*, museum.unc.edu

⁵ Jane De Hart Matthews, “The Chance of a Lifetime” from *Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, 24.

⁶ “Folk Plays,” *The Carolina Story: A Virtual Museum of University History*, museum.unc.edu

the playbill of the Carolina Playmakers' opening weekend, Koch described a folk drama as:

The term "folk," as we use it, has nothing to do with the folk play of medieval times. But rather is it [sic] concerned with folk subject matter: with the legends, superstitions, customs, environmental differences, and the vernacular of the common people. For the most part they are realistic and human; sometimes they are imaginative and poetic.

The chief concern of the folk dramatist is man's conflict with the forces of nature and his simple pleasure in being alive. The conflict may not be apparent on the surface in the immediate action on the stage. But the ultimate cause of all dramatic action we classify as 'folk,' whether it be physical or spiritual, may be found in man's desperate struggle for existence and in his enjoyment of the world of nature. The term 'folk' with us applies to that form of drama which is earth-rooted in the life of our common humanity.

For many years our playwrights of the South-- indeed all of America-- were imitative, content with reproducing the outlived formulas of the old world. There was nothing really *native* about them. Whenever they did write of American life, the treatment was superficial and innocuous.⁷

This utilization of folklore and regional mythology in order to uncover the human experience became a common style in the plays that the Playmakers and Koch worked to produce in conjunction with the FTP. Koch's understanding of folk drama does not have set elements that are present within each work labelled a folk play. Rather, the work produced under him often contained elements of Southern myth and folklore, a respect for nature, and a focus on people and their stories (as opposed to issues.) Additionally, there was a duality within the term folk that the Playmakers often explored. Either it referred to folklore and myth, or it focused on the human experience and lives of people. The term could focus on the fictions of myth and folklore, or the reality of the human experience. Koch goes on to explain:

⁷ Koch, "Drama in the South" in *Pioneering a People's Theatre*, e.d. Archibald Henderson, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina press, 1945, 10-11.

From the first our particular interest in North Carolina has been the use of native materials and the making of fresh dramatic forms. We have found that if the writer observes the locality with which he is most familiar and interprets it faithfully, it may show him the way to the universal. If he can see the interestingness of the lives of those about him with understanding and imagination, with wonder, why may not he interpret that life in significant images for others-- perhaps for all? It has been so in all lasting art.⁸

Walter Spearman describes these folk plays as fresh, new, honest, and realistic.

Characters and settings were genuine and simple, different from the typical plays of the period. The students gained inspiration from their surroundings, history, and lives.

Because the inspiration was broad, so were the works; while the folk drama tradition was distinct, there were few defining elements. There does seem to be, however, two elements that are always within folk drama: a rural, Southern setting and a focus on the everyday life of the common man. As Koch states:

The materials were drawn by each writer from scenes familiar and near, often from remembered adventures of his youth, from folk tales and the common tradition, and from present-day life in North Carolina. They are plays of native expressiveness, of considerable range and variety, presenting scenes from the remote coves of the Great Smoky Mountains to the dangerous coves shoals of Cape Hatteras.⁹

An additional desire for this group was that by creating folk drama, it would be the People's Theatre. The plays produced would be about the common, everyday man: his struggles, his deep connection to nature, and his joy at simply being alive. Likewise, these works are not about a political issue, rather they focus on the lives of normal people, which are affected by their circumstances. Within these folk plays, there is a Rousseauian peasant love, a holdover from the Romantic Period, where the peasants, here common folk, are the real protagonists and heroes. Finally, the idea of the folk drama is a

⁸ Spearman, 17.

⁹ Koch, *Pioneering a People's Theatre*, 9-10.

resistance to East Coast elitism because of its simplicity and focus on the lives of regular people. These elements would all be seen in the script of *King Cotton*.

The Chapel Hill Unit and King Cotton Production History

In May of 1936, *Chapel Hill Weekly* reported that a group of dramatists from the Federal Theatre Project were arriving in Chapel Hill, South Carolina in order to study with Frederick Koch and Paul Green. The program that Koch proposed would “pay writers while they honed their skills at a university-based regional center,” which “could show that federal and state-funded institutions could work together to produce a national theatre.”¹⁰ One of the goals of the Chapel Hill unit was to create regional art featuring local stories. Koch was an encouraging force to anyone that he thought would be a good writer for the Project. Many people were drawn to Chapel Hill for its notable use of folk drama, which the academic program was well known for, and the progressive atmosphere of the university in addition to working with the famed Carolina Playmaker group: “The University of North Carolina enjoyed a reputation as a place of progressive ideas and enlightened thought in the South, in part because of the work of the Carolina Playmakers.”¹¹ The four FTP dramatists that arrived in the area- Robert Finch, Herbert Meadow, Grace Murphy, and Betty Smith- were there on assignment for an initial three months with the option to renew their stays. Moore relates, “Once in Chapel Hill, the four Federal Theatre writers found themselves absorbed into a network of students, alumni,

¹⁰ Cecelia Moore, “What Happens to Playwrights” in *The Federal Theatre Project in the American South: The Carolina Playmakers and the quest for American Drama*, 119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

and other writers who gravitated to the University as a center of regional creativity. They sat in on Koch's playwriting classes and joined a graduate playwriting class led by Paul Green."¹² One of the issues faced by the dramatists of the FTP was that they were unable to copyright, and thus could not gain royalty fees from, the work that they did while employed by the Project. Because of this, playwrights were unenthusiastic about doing exceptional or creative work. Koch combated this by assigning the dramatists on loan to work on historical research for plays that could be put on by the community theatre units in North Carolina. In addition, they also wrote a newsletter, *Backstage*, for the North Carolina Federal Theatre units.

When the three-month stay ended, all four dramatists returned to New York, but Smith and Finch applied to return to Chapel Hill. This time, they wrote plays for the FTP and read plays in which North Carolina Project leaders had interest. Additionally they were to "compile 'local histories and other local data about the revolutionary and pre-revolutionary period,' for a group in New York working on historical scripts."¹³ Koch and Green did everything they could to allow Smith and Finch to stay in North Carolina, which included tasking them to write a living newspaper so that they would not be relocated to another Southern unit. When Josef Lentz, a technical supervisor in the Southern region, discovered the writers in North Carolina, he wanted them relocated to Birmingham, so that he could oversee them. Green and Koch, however, appealed to John McGee, the regional director of the Southern region, who came up with the idea for the living newspaper that would keep Smith and Finch in Chapel Hill. Both McGee and

¹² Ibid., 126.

¹³ Ibid., 136.

Lentz wanted a contemporary play about the South's social problems, which could be discussed through the commodity of cotton. This was a crop that was a large part of the economy, industrial growth, and a national identifier. UNC had vast information on the Southern region because of the sociological and economic studies done by the people at Howard Odum's Institute for Social Research. Additionally, Koch and Green's program was notorious for tackling the South's issues and history, while also navigating potentially sensitive political topics. With this in mind, McGee contacted Koch saying that the Project is "very interested to develop the technique of writing for the Living Newspaper style of theatre."¹⁴ McGee asked if there was a way to involve Koch's playwriting students, Finch and Smith, in developing a script about "a subject in which the University of North Carolina has a distinguished research record."¹⁵ These machinations allowed for Smith and Finch to remain in North Carolina. Finally, it was decided that the dramatists would work on a living newspaper play about the subject of cotton. One of the most important things to note is that Smith and Finch were essentially Northerners writing within the Southern tradition of folk drama.

Robert Finch was born in Dillon, Montana 1909. At one time in his life, he had been a newspaper reporter and orchestra leader before he moved to New York to pursue acting and playwriting. He attended the University of North Carolina, but left in 1932 with a fellowship to study at Yale. This was where he met Betty Smith, future FTP dramatist, and his future spouse. While at Yale, they began an affair, though Smith was separated and had two children. He left Yale two years later without completing his

¹⁴ John McGee to Frederick Koch, Oct. 23, 1937, Paul Green Papers.

¹⁵ Moore, 137-8.

degree, returning to New York. He joined the FTP at the end of 1935 and had sporadic acting jobs between leaving Yale and joining the Project.

Betty Smith (born Elisabeth Wehner) was born to the children of two German immigrants in Brooklyn. After her father died in 1913, Smith had to quit high school in order to work to help support her family. At age 22, she married George Smith, and the pair migrated to Michigan. They had two children, and after her husband became a lawyer, Smith once again pursued her education. She obtained permission to attend classes at the University of Michigan, where she pursued her interest in drama, and excelled in her studies. “In 1931, she won the Avery Hopwood Drama Award for the best play written at the University of Michigan, which led to an invitation from George Pierce Baker to study at Yale University.”¹⁶ Upon her completion of the Yale program, she began working with the WPA before moving to the FTP. When Smith learned of a chance to attend UNC Chapel Hill, she telegraphed Koch: “Very anxious to join your young playwrights experimental project...Always wanted to come to Chapel Hill to study playwriting... I know of your reputation in theatre and will work enthusiastically on your project.”¹⁷ She also asked Koch to request Finch join the group. This gave them an outsider perspective on Southern identity, as has happened with the other living newspapers discussed up to this point. The difference, however, was their use of the folk style and the influence of their time in the region.

¹⁶ Ibid., 126.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Throughout Smith and Finch's time in Chapel Hill, they wrote a series of one acts and *King Cotton*, a living newspaper script about the issues that cotton production caused in the region. Smith and Finch used Koch's version of folk drama to write about the experience of working-class citizens in the country. As Chapel Hill scholar Cecelia Moore states, "not surprisingly the generation that came of age in the 1930s melded the idea of the folk with themes from the radical culture front of social justice and workers rights- the folk became the proletariat and folk drama became the 'people's theatre,' a phrase used repeatedly within the Project and at the University of North Carolina."¹⁸ By incorporating the style of folk drama into the works that the FTP writers were doing, it distinguished the work from other units. This is particularly true of *King Cotton*.

Throughout their time working on the *King Cotton* script, Smith and Finch had the resource of the scholarship from the Institute of Social Science Research:

Howard Odum's *Southern Regions of the United States*; Rupert Vance's *Human Factors in Cotton Culture*; Embree, Johnson, and Alexander's *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* and more. Their sources followed the tale of cotton into industrial relations and textile mills with works like *Cotton Mill People of the Piedmont: A Study in Social Change* by Marjorie Potwin, and *Welfare Work in Mill Villages* by Harriet Herring. They also had an equally extensive list of fictional works, including Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, Paul Green's *This Body the Earth*, and Loretto Carroll Bailey's *Strike Song*.¹⁹

Likewise, sources were also gathered by those working on the script, such as interviews with local officials. In addition to Smith and Finch, two of Koch's graduate students, William Peery and Clemon White, collaborated on research and writing. Each playwright

¹⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

was in charge of writing a portion of the script based on these interviews and informational sources. William Peery states that the theme of the show would be:

...cotton, and what it has done to the South.' The play should, 'wherever possible...expose fraud, dishonesty, hypocrisy, bad conditions of any kind,' Peery suggested. He added that he thought the idea 'preetty sombre,' and said, 'If we don't look out we will miss the pleasant side of the south- the beauty, humor, gaiety, color and music.' Despite this preference, Peery proposed a hard-hitting ending, one that depicted passage of the farm tenancy bill, followed by a scene that showed how the bill 'did not go far enough' and that those people not helped by the bill would step forward and speak about their plight. 'Figuratively, they will say, but what about us?'²⁰

Based on these comments from Peery, it is clear that *King Cotton* was going to diverge from the typical living newspaper and the way in which it presented the South. Though it would not shy away from issues, it would not ignore the things that made the South unique. The utilization of the Britt family in place of the Little Man character brings the feeling of folk drama to the forefront, but it does not necessarily detract from the fact that this was still a living newspaper.

Summation of King Cotton

King Cotton opens on a Senate committee meeting about the 'problem' of the South, with Mr. Elbert Q. Expert, a character representing university researchers, claiming that all would be solved if the region had a proper educational system. When he begins to spout statistics with the help of Mr. Blackboard (Bee Bee), Southern sharecropper Hubert Britt enters to tell the committee that it is not merely education that has strained the South. Farmer Britt would show Expert what the South was really like, enabling him to understand what would have to be done to make the region prosperous.

²⁰ Ibid., 143.

Specifically, Britt would show him that the problems in the South were intrinsically linked to cotton and a one-crop economy. The majority of the rest of the living newspaper sees Expert observing the South and the problems that have arisen from multi-generational sharecropping, especially the extreme poverty of landless sharecroppers. The congressional committee sends Expert with Hubert Britt in order to discern what the true issues of Southern sharecroppers were. During his time in the South, Expert is shown the relationship between the region and education, religion, life among tenant farmers, tenant farmers outside the home, economics, mill workers, marriage, crime, marketing cotton, labor and capital, and the future. Additionally, during his year in the South, Mr. Expert becomes attached to the Southerners, particularly Ruth Britt. For this reason, when Expert goes back to the committee, his account moves the group so much that they declare they will not leave the room until they figure out a way in which to help the South.

When Expert arrives in the South, he witnesses the state of poverty of the common sharecropper and meets the rest of the Britt family. John Britt, one of the sons, is forced to choose between farming and education in order to fulfill his wishes to marry his girlfriend Helen. Helen works in a textile mill and looks upon the idea of being a tenant farmer's wife with vitriol. This couple demonstrates the folk characteristic of simple, elemental emotions as their love is more important than money and outward success.

Ruth, the oldest daughter is a kind young woman who simply wants a better life. Steve, the youngest son, personifies some of the negative stereotypes of the South due to his interest in crime which leads to his eventual death. Linnie Lee, the youngest Britt

daughter marries at the age of fifteen to lessen the burden on her family. Mrs. Britt is exasperated, overworked, caring for a baby, and weathered by too many years living in poverty. Gramps is a lazy old man who is more interested in living a life of leisure and leeching from what he can get from his family. Finally, the last son, Dave, is more interested in following his grandfather's footsteps in leading a lazy, unproductive life. Dave and Gramps exemplify multiple negative stereotypes of the South such as laziness and unwillingness to change. From his observations of the Britt family, Expert witnesses firsthand the effects that the issues plaguing the South have on actual people.

Apart from his interactions with and observations of the Britt family, Expert gains understanding of the lives of sharecroppers through discussions with other characters. He first learns about the poor-quality soil that results from single crop farming. He then discusses the upgraded amenities that a prison sentence would provide some of the local farmers. Expert also discusses a specific cotton-picking machine with its local inventor. Throughout all of this, there are hecklers within the audience who are asking Expert why Southerners do not work to change their situation. Scene Three (C) sees Expert, Hubert, John, and Ruth go to the landlord, Mr. Powers', store to learn more about the people of the agrarian South. This scene also provides hints of the relationship that will eventually develop between Ruth and Expert. During this scene the town folk talk of various things, including education and religion, specifically evolution, which is a possible reference to the *Scopes* trial. Also in this scene Expert learns more about how tenant farming functions. Scene four discusses how members of sharecropping families marry young. This is seen through Linnie Lee's marriage to sharecropper, Frankie. Additionally, Linnie Lee's explanation for her marriage is reminiscent of the simple emotions that Spearman

credits to folk dramas.²¹ It gives insight into the landlord through the process of settling up debt and a burgeoning friendship between Expert and Powers. Scene five discusses the tenant farmer and crime, specifically the belief that crime is committed in the South out of ignorance rather than poverty. Chain gangs are also discussed within this portion of the script, as is the brutality that criminals face, and the lynch culture prevalent in the South. Following this, an anti-lynching bill is introduced in a ‘Senate Committee Flash’ and this leads into intermission.

Right after intermission, Mr. Blackboard tells the audience about the developments in the South in the past year. This includes a brief update on the land, lynching, marriages, and deaths. He also includes information on the Britt family, such as the fact that Linnie Lee and her husband had a baby, John Britt is trying to get into an agricultural college to aid him in his quest to marry Helen Riley, Steve Britt went to work in the mill, and most interesting, “...Ruth Britt is in love with Mr. Expert. And he with her, of course.”²² He also details that Expert had to return to Washington for three months to rearrange his transfer to another project.²³

The beginning of Act Two discusses tenant farmer and religion, specifically the difference between a black church and a white one, with the former likened to Holy Rollers. These scenes are particularly interesting because of this clear delineation

²¹ Spearman, 8.

²² Betty Smith and Robert Finch, *King Cotton*, Federal Theatre Project Material Collections George Mason University, Right After Intermission.

²³ This scene is entitled “Our South,” the footnote tells us that the entire scene is a paraphrase on *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder.

between churches; one is certainly more spiritual and active than the other. The following scene, seven, begins discussions of the tenant farmer and education, specifically the fact that there is little academic freedom in the South. The following scenes discuss the marketing of cotton, which is followed by descriptions of the rocky relations between the tenant farmer and mill worker. During these sequences, the audience learns more about Steve Britt becoming more interested in crime. The next portions of the script have to do with the tenant farmer and labor and capital, involving a strike at the mill. The final scenes deal with the tenant farmer and the future, which looks at a possible farm bill, the success of some tenant farmers, and a new spring. The final scene sees Mr. Expert and Ruth, who are to get married, returning to Washington where Expert reveals his findings to the Senate committee and they declare that they will remain in session until a bill to help the South has been drawn up to correct the Southern issues.

Form of King Cotton

One of the most notable differences between the *King Cotton* script and other living newspapers was its form. As noted by John O'Connor, "much of the play reflects the group's interest in tragic folk drama. At heart, *King Cotton* is a domestic melodrama with a strong social commitment."²⁴ While all other living newspapers feature historical and social context for the problem at hand, *King Cotton* lacks such context. The typical format of living newspapers first lays out how the issue came to occur throughout history. Take for instance *Power*; though there is one scene for exposition which introduces the

²⁴ John O'Connor, "The Drama of Farming: The Federal Theatre Living Newspapers on Agriculture," *Prospects* 15, 1990, 352.

topic, “what power is, and how much we depend on it,”²⁵ Scene two features the history of electricity, i.e. who invented it and how it came to be used in modern society. This is the format that most living newspaper plays took. *King Cotton*, however, does not give the audience any historical background for the issues that the people of the South were facing. Rather, the audience is informed that the Southern states are having issues, particularly in the area of agriculture, and the authors provide no further background information as to how this became an issue for the South. Though this seems like an inconsequential change from other living newspapers, it is one of the first indications that *King Cotton* is its own entity, divergent from what has been experienced from living newspapers thus far.

Additionally, this ties into Koch’s idea of the folk, in that it reflects the experience of humanity and the struggle for existence. “In [living newspapers] people’s problems were portrayed as the result not of personal failure but of social conditions and an exploitative capitalist system.”²⁶ Another indication of diverging into folk drama is the usage of folk music throughout the play.²⁷ Though other living newspapers utilized music and sounds, *King Cotton* specifies the inclusion of folk music, which furthers the melding of forms; the use of folk music in particular helps support the ideals of simplistic beauty of the region that are reinforced by folk drama.

²⁵ *Power*, 15.

²⁶ *Moore*, 139.

²⁷ *O’Connor*, 352.

This script also lends itself toward the form of domestic drama, as noted by O'Connor, in regard to the lack of analysis of the region's issues. Though they are brought up, the linkage that each scene shares with the topic of cotton is not always made clear. This indicates that the issues surrounding the production of cotton are systemic, and not simple to fix.

The most notable aspect of domestic drama found in this script is love. This emotion is used as a guide/link throughout the play. John Britt is in love with Helen, a local girl, but she refuses to marry him as she does not want to become stuck in the cycle of poverty that was pervasive among tenant farmers in the South. Instead of going steady with John, she begins to see Bill Gibson, a mill worker. Though Gibson does not make much more money than John, he is not stuck in the same cycle of poverty that John Britt would be if he chose to continue on into getting his own plot of land and be a tenant farmer. Helen is stern about her decision to not become the wife of a tenant farmer because she "ain't aimin' to kill myself raisin' babies and boll weevils"²⁸ however, she eventually decides that she would rather be with John and the wife of a poor tenant farmer than to be with a man who had more money but whom she didn't love. "Just as long as Helen and I can be together, we don't care how hard we work."²⁹ Instead of making this an issues play about poverty and sharecropping, *King Cotton* makes the audience care about these problems because of the effect they have not simply on the common man, but a group of people that the audience has come to know. The play also romanticizes this concept; though Helen is portrayed as uneducated and a bit simple, she

²⁸ Smith and Finch, 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 198.

chooses love over money, which is an emotional moment that is fitting with the folk nature of the piece.

The other couple that develops throughout the play is Ruth Britt and Mr. Expert. Throughout Mr. Expert's time in the South, Ruth is one of the people who shows him around and explains issues to him. Together they attend various churches and she serves as one of his guides to the area. It is presumably this time that they have spent together that brings them closer. Also important is the outsider, in this case a Northerner, coming in to save the poor Southern girl from her problems. This focus on love throughout the play furthers the feeling that this was written in the folk tradition. Love is a topic found within everyday life rather than a living newspaper. By incorporating these emotions, the playwrights further situated this work between the two types of play.

A large divergence in the form of *King Cotton* is that it blends forms; it is no longer simply a living newspaper because of the folk aspects that were incorporated into the script. These elements of folk drama include the utilization of folk drama characters such as black and white sharecroppers, mill workers, and prisoners. It also incorporated folk music and songs. As already discussed, the addition of love to the script is a notable aspect of folk drama that has been incorporated. The melding of forms is most notable in the playwrights' choice to depict the stages and cycle of poverty through the members of the Britt family. It is through the usage of the Britt family that the writers are able to explore the social conditions that have disallowed Southerners from moving into a higher standard of living. It is the human elements of the script, specifically the characters, help distinguish *King Cotton* from a normal living newspaper and puts it into the realm of folk drama. Rather than discuss ideas through politics or economics only, the play explores its

themes through the characters themselves, linking it both to domestic and folk drama. Additionally, through Mr. Expert's investigations, the exploitative capitalist system which Moore refers to is exposed through the explanation of the harms of a one crop economy, which the Southern agrarians are unable to change.

As previously mentioned, there is a distinct emphasis on love, a concept common in folk plays. This is seen in the familial bond of the Britts' as well as the relationship between Helen and John. Though she is fearful of a future with him due to economic reasons, she ultimately agrees to the marriage because of her great love for him. Additionally, over the course of the play, Ruth and Mr. Expert fall in love. The development of their relationship, which happens in the agrarian setting of the South, reinforces the folk drama trope of pastoral romance. The choice to have Ruth return to Washington with Expert when he goes back to report to the senate demonstrates the lasting nature of their relationship; it exists outside the pastoral setting.

As O'Connor states, "The play often implies personal solutions to the economic and social problems of the South."³⁰ This reliance on personal solutions demonstrates that the South has a distinct way of conducting business and solving problems that further separates the region from the North. Therefore, the only way that a Southerner is able to combat the issues that are brought on by the cotton industry is through personal rather than political or administrative means. This is also something that is very folk-like in nature rather than similar to living newspapers.

When the script was sent to the Play Bureau for review, it was labeled, read, and shot down as a living newspaper- not as a piece of folk drama. So though there are

³⁰O'Connor, 354.

certainly elements of the folk, it was still very much a living newspaper with a folk drama twist. The form of the living newspaper lends itself to having characters that are very one dimensional, but *King Cotton* as a folk drama challenge that. Instead of the concern for a single issue, the audience witnesses a myriad of problems in the area and they have a fully developed feel to them. To reiterate, the living newspaper traditions that it adheres to but also flips are the Britt family as the Little Man, Elbert Q. Expert as the Voice of the Living Newspaper, folk music is utilized rather than an extensive sound design, and elements of non-realistic dramaturgy such as the insertion of facts into normal conversation, the heckling done by the audience, the flashes to the senate committee.

The South as Distinct Region

As has been previously stressed, the people of the American North, really any part of the nation beyond the South, had the power to perpetuate certain beliefs and stereotypes about Southerners, whether intentional or not. The view of the South that was popular during this time saw the South as uneducated, unwilling to change, racist, and poverty stricken. As previously discussed, these views are established and perpetuated by the living newspapers written by Northern units of the FTP. The writers of *King Cotton* were not Southerners, but their time spent in the region provided them with a different experience with the South than any previous FTP writers. Though *King Cotton* is not full of vituperation for the region, it is also not an apologia for the South or an embracement of Southern Romanticism. The authors were not blind to the issues and lingering problems in the South as demonstrated through the portrayal of the key stereotypes of the Northern construct of Southern identity seen in other living newspapers. This is another aspect that makes the play unique; it is written from a Northern perspective, but it has a

humanity and level of understanding not commonly found in other living newspapers due to the authors' personal connections to the region.

Though this is different from other living newspapers, it still contains elements of the Northern criteria for the construction of the South. The first of these is the idea that Southerners are uneducated. This is first seen when Mr. Expert gives the statistic that a vast number of Southerners are illiterate. "...the South is backward. In the United States as a whole only four people out of every hundred are illiterate. But in the South ten out of every hundred are illiterate among the subjects of cotton."³¹ The most powerful example of this occurs in scene five (A): The Tenant Farmer and Crime. In this scene, the criminologist Dr. G.K. Brown tells Mr. Expert that, "Southern crime is based on ignorance rather than on poverty," and goes on to say "...the tenants seem to be pretty happy because they don't know any better. They do not greatly want a higher standard of living----the sort of thing that would lead them into crime----because they have never known what it was to have one. Their deficient culture doesn't permit them to recognize the possible advantage to them of crime for economic gain."³² The first of these quotes details factual information that there were legitimately fewer educated people in the South than the rest of the country, though it is not exactly explained why. Additionally, it is believed that the problems of the South will be solved if they were properly educated. The second quotation listed is more in line with an 'othered' view of the South. It does not give factual information but is rather a supposition made by a criminologist. Within this scene, Dr. Brown is insistent that they are simply ignorant and happy to be so. This

³¹ Smith and Finch, 10-11.

³² Ibid., 90.

meets the Northern criteria for the created image of the South; not only are they uneducated, but they are content to be so.

Another Northern criterion for the subaltern perception of the South is that the citizens of the region were unwilling to change, even if it was to better themselves. For instance, when Hubert Britt is showing Mr. Expert the land, Expert suggests that dairy farming would be a good choice for the region. Britt responds by saying “Huh? What? Oh cows! Yeh, well! But we always grow cotton here in the South. Except where we grow tobacco. Guess no one would think of doin’ any other way.”³³ Another instance of this Southern unchangeability is seen after the intermission. Mr. Blackboard (Bee Bee) relates to the audience that a year has passed in the South since the end of Act One, and things have gone on as usual. After Bee Bee tells of all the things that have happened during the audience's absence, he ends his monologue with, “We ain’t folks to do much changin’.”³⁴ While some things are getting worse, there are others which are remaining stagnant; nothing in the South is improving.

Another characteristic of the South as detailed by the Northern criteria is that they are incredibly racist. There are many instances of racism in this script, which is to be expected due to the social climate in the South at this time. One of the first is when Jim Crow train cars are mentioned. Hubert Britt tells Mr. Expert, “If we let them get the upper hand they’ll run us out of the country” and goes on to say, “Take my advice, young feller and don’t go buttin’ in the race problem down here. That’s something that

³³ Ibid., 18.

³⁴ Ibid., Post intermission, after 104.

only the South understands and only the South can handle.”³⁵ Here, it is acknowledged by the people of the South that there is a severe race problem, and that they wanted for there to be a clear divide between the races. In addition to the Jim Crow issues, there are several racial slurs against black people within the script, the most common of which is “nigger.” In Scene Two (C) when discussing tenant farming, Steve Britt says, “Place don’t suit the white tenants, there’s always one nigger glad to move in. Landlord would sooner take a nigger tenant always. They work as hard and don’t ask for as much as white folks do.”³⁶ This shows that racism in the South has also become a form of class distinction, where white people still have authority over black people. The final racial issue that the script really addresses is the lynch culture of the South at the time. The most notable of these instances was Scene 5 (C): The Tenant Farmer and Crime, where a group of white people is actively trying to lynch a black man for having relations with a white woman.³⁷ Though the sheriff would not allow for the group to proceed with a lynching, the activity was talked about flippantly. By this time, it was so normalized and ingrained in the culture that murdering a man and vigilante justice were the norm.

The final Northern criteria about the South that this script fulfills is that people of the South, specifically the Southern agrarians, are poverty stricken. This idea is primarily supported by the portrayal of Southern agrarians having many children in order to provide cheap labor. This is first discussed in Scene Two (A). Helen responds to John Britt's attempts to persuade her to marry him by stating: “I was meant to have a mess of

³⁵ Ibid., 17.

³⁶ Ibid., 39.

³⁷ Ibid., 102-3.

children so that the sons of our landlords can have cheap labor later on. Somebody put it in the paper that the South will populate the nation.”³⁸ Having children for cheap labor is brought up again by Ruth in Two (C) when Linnie Lee is talking about wanting to have children at a young age: “You ought to be glad you don’t have to have ‘em, yet. One every year to furnish “hands” for the landlord’s fields.”³⁹ The livelihood of many tenant farmers is determined by child labor; the number of children a couple has determines how much help they will be able to receive on the farm. This ensures that the cycle of poverty will continue through generations.

While *King Cotton* reinforces many of the elements of Southern identity as created by the North, it diverges from this through perspective, form, content, and overall purpose. As has been stated, while written by outsiders to the region, the playwrights did spend time in the South which gave them a different perspective than the New York units. In terms of the form, though written in the style of living newspapers, *King Cotton* embraces the Southern tradition of folk drama. However, the play does not overlook problems of the region in favor of a pastoral romanticizing of the South. William Peery was passionate about showing the audience all parts of the South, not simply the things that make it good or interesting. The inclusion of these negative elements reinforces the Northern construction of the South. However, the play also contradicts multiple elements of these Northern images of the South.

³⁸ Ibid., 22.

³⁹ Ibid., 34.

Contradictions of Northern Images

Based on these instances, it is clear that *King Cotton* conforms to many ideas about the South as it had been constructed by the playwrights of the North. However, the playwrights also include images that contradict the typical Northern perception of the South and complicates the issue. Rather than only depicting the South as a racist, desolate place the authors chose to celebrate some of the things that make the South a distinct place. This is depicted by the language, land, independence, and the ending of the Britt family.

The play features a variety of distinct dialects, adding a layer of authenticity and realism to the writing and the characters. Throughout the play, Southerners speak differently from those out of the region. A southern drawl and dropping of the final letters in certain words gives the characters a distinctly Southern feel. While in other living newspapers that feature the South, a southern dialect is utilized to ‘other’ the South, in *King Cotton*, the southern accent is the majority, thereby losing the impact of othering. Interestingly, the accent is romanticized by a ‘sentimental lady,’ who is presumably part of a non-realistic audience during an interlude with Mr. Blackboard: “I said even if they don’t have screens, think of the lovely Southern accents they have. And the smell of honeysuckle on moonlight nights down South is positively divine.”⁴⁰ While the linguistic distinction between North and South is used in other living newspapers as a means of portraying negative aspects of Southern identity, in *King Cotton* the distinction is used to showcase how 'lovely' the accents are. This language is also similar to the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 49.

“simple, elemental emotions and poetic colloquial speech” that was popular in the North Carolina folk plays, as Spearman illustrates.⁴¹

Similar to the glamorization of the Southern accent, the terra and landscape of the South are romanticized once again by a non-Southerner. In Scene Three (C), Expert remarks to the eldest Britt son, John, “It’s such a lovely dreamy country you have down here. It’s hard to believe that beneath this softness and the fine old trees and the lush flowers there’s so much of tragedy. Sometimes I think that in later years, I shall find it easier to recall the loveliness of the honey-suckle [sic] scented night than----- Pardon me. I’m not talking at all like an expert.”⁴² Again, this reinforces a glamorization of the region that was occurring during this time. However, it also celebrates the land in which Southern agrarians take great pride.

The play also frequently explores Southern independence from the North. The play presents the relationship between the South and the North as derisive and hostile at points, it is clear that the people of the South value their differences and separation from the North. A notable instance of this is when Hubert Britt uses the term “Dixie” to refer to the South. Though this was entirely common at the time, it is important to note that it clearly designates the South as a separate area from the rest of the country. As previously mentioned, this feeling of independence from the rest of the country often rears itself as a feeling of hostility between the North and South within this script. At one point Powers, a landlord, and Bill Carney, a mill worker, are discussing politicians and preachers; Powers states “What does bother me is these Northerners that come around here ever so often,” to

⁴¹ Spearman, 8.

⁴² Smith and Finch, 62.

which Bill responds “Yeh. Yeh. It’s the North that’s wrong with the South.” According to the footnotes of the script, Bill’s words are a direct quote from a southern gentleman bus rider that Clemon White interviewed during the research portion of the living newspaper writing process. This makes it clear that this is a sentiment shared by actual Southerners, not just fictional characters within a script, offering more authenticity than other living newspapers. While there are many other examples of this independence/hostility, these two highlight the two distinct camps that the feeling falls into.

The final way in which the writers of this living newspaper celebrated the South was through the Britt family. The Britt family stays to fight for the South, to improve it for the future. Even though change and tragedy has struck the family, they do not give up their Southern values. This comes into play specifically with Mr. Expert, who in his engagement and assured marriage to Ruth Britt, becomes tied to the South by blood. Though he was not born in the South, he becomes a sort of pseudo-Southerner throughout his year in the South during his research and his subsequent marriage to a Southern woman. After his time with the people of the South, Expert is ready to do everything within his power to come up with a solution to the problems of the South. It is not simply the Britt’s that are here to fight for the South, but the Congressional committee is now on the side of the South as well.

King Cotton portrays the South in a different light than any of the other living newspapers that feature the region, possibly because it was the only drama of this format written in the regional style of folk drama. What is most important to note, however, is that *King Cotton* complicates the issue of the South. For Mr. Expert, what began as an investigation in improving education in the area, became so much more: “I started out to

study cotton farming. But I come down here and soon see the South's problems are all mixed up together. It's education and religion and housing and sharecropping and violence and crime and erosion and soil depletion----"⁴³ *King Cotton* complicates the 'problem' of the South. First, in choosing the topic of a region rather than a single issue, that immediately changes things, letting people know that this is not the typical living newspaper. It indicates that things in the South are different than what anyone expects; things in the South are changing. Likewise, it complicates typical Northern stereotypes by adding humanity and complexity to its characters and their struggles. *King Cotton* does not depict a caricature of the South, but rather a nuanced place with a variety of people. the South is painted as a vibrant region that is not at all dried up for creativity like Mencken and his contemporaries believed.

As with many of the living newspapers that were in progress when the FTP came under fire by the House Un-American Activities Committee, *King Cotton* never had the chance to be produced. When it was first reviewed by Play Bureau readers in July and August of 1938, it was not well-received. Not only did two of the three readers reject the script, they claimed that it was too long, "difficult to follow," and utilized "every hackneyed device made familiar by the New York living newspapers, and contributes a little smart-aleck humor of its own."⁴⁴ In late August, the head of the Play Bureau declared that *King Cotton* was unstageable and, furthermore, wasn't worth being revised. He did however, suggest that it may be worthwhile to begin again, as Josef Lentz still

⁴³ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁴ Moore, 144.

wanted a script on cotton. When reading between the lines, it is clear that the Play Bureau did this in order to avoid confrontation and censorship with Washington. Additionally, *King Cotton* was passed along just after the White House economic report on the South had declared the South the “Nation’s No. 1 economic problem.”⁴⁵ While this draft was not the complete downfall of the script, Moore writes, “What is not recorded in official memos or reports are the internal debates over the virtues or faults of the *King Cotton* script versus producing any play focused on the problems of the South. The Project had openly announced its plans earlier in the year, when it reported that Finch and Smith were ‘in North Carolina preparing a script called ‘King Cotton,’ which would pay special attention to sharecropping.’”⁴⁶ Josef Lentz, however, seemed to be the only person interested in continuing with a script on cotton. Though he attempted once again to have Smith and Finch relocated, North Carolina officials, with the assistance of state WPA director George Coan stepped in to prevent the pair from departing the state on shaky terms. This was the same month that the House Un-American Activities Committee was formed and the Federal Theatre was declared a “hot bed for Communists” and “one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine.”⁴⁷ After this, it was clear that living newspapers were too contentious and would put the Project at more risk

⁴⁵ Report on Economic Conditions of the South, 1938.

⁴⁶ Moore, 144.

⁴⁷ “Theatre Project Faces an Inquiry,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1938, 19; Flanagan, *Arena*, 335-340.

than it already was. Likewise, after October 1938, no living newspapers were staged within the confines of the Federal Theatre.⁴⁸

Based on the feedback from the Play Bureau readers, it is plausible that the melding of forms utilized in the creation of this script is part of the reason it was never produced.

The Play Bureau claimed that the plot was too convoluted to follow. However, its complexity is not out of line when compared to other living newspapers. It is possible that the rejection of *King Cotton* is due to the fact that the form of folk drama embraces the unique beauty of the South, as opposed to simply portraying the negative Northern images of the region. The South as seen within the script for *King Cotton* was too controversial and different to be staged.

⁴⁸ Moore, 144-5.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Upon the conclusion of this study, it is important to address the fact that this work changed significantly since the initial research phase. I had been working toward something that would demonstrate a clear delineation between the American South and the rest of the country. Furthermore, my hope was to showcase a Northern hegemony which was able to influence the rest of the country into accepting these ideas about the South as fact. Setting up the South as a distinct region utilizing Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and then laying out the elements of how people viewed the South with Mencken, Shapiro, and Cobb made this study appear simple. However, as my work continued it became clear that these living newspapers were more nuanced than appeared on first reading. *Triple-A* demonstrates the most stereotypical views of the South, yet each successive work provides more nuanced portrayals. The representation of the South evolves over the course of *Triple-A*, *Power* and *The South*, culminating in the most complex of these works, *King Cotton*. All this is to say that these works say more about the construction of Southern identity than I had initially given them credit for. Though they are not perfect, they are not the vitriolic work that Mencken would have liked to see.

The other factor of half these works that I did not have the opportunity to fully delve into was the fact that *The South* and *King Cotton* both remained unproduced. It is necessary here to clarify that while it is important that these works were never seen by an audience, this study looks specifically at the approach of the playwrights rather than

audience response. In other words, this study looks at the construction of Southern identity via the works created by the playwrights rather than the construction of identity from the audience perspective based on what they saw within these living newspapers. Though it is interesting to speculate why the two most nuanced of these living newspapers were never produced, what is most important to this study is that they were written. It seems more likely that they were both too political, an issue that would negatively reflect back on the Federal Theatre, putting the future of the Project in jeopardy. However, it is possible that the hegemony of the North and the desire of the people of the North to keep the South under hegemonic oppression prevented these shows from being produced. Because *The South* and *King Cotton* offered more nuanced portrayals, the fact that they were never produced is interesting in itself. In order to perpetuate the Northern hegemony, shows that offered a more conclusive view of the region would interrupt the work of the hegemon. These shows keep the South under the Northern hegemon because the most nuanced view of the region is not available for people to see, thus making it impossible for people to come to conclusions of their own.

The concept of hegemony applies not only to the North, but to the Federal Government and its influence. As was mentioned in previous chapters, the works of the FTP, living newspapers in particular, tended to align and promote New Deal policies, such as the AAA and the TVA. These massive Federal projects, of which the Federal Theatre Project itself is a part, are supported within these living newspapers. Within the constructs of the Federal hegemony, the Northern hegemony is reinforced because it exists in many ways as a subset of said Federal hegemony. While the North demonstrated support for the Federal Government, the South was in the midst of the Lost

Cause Narrative, continuing debate over State's rights, and the Great Northward Migration. The Lost Cause narrative demonstrates the false and idealized identity the South had created for itself. Though the South attempted to create a positive narrative through works of literature, construction of monuments to the Confederacy, and developing Southern pride, the works of the FTP stand in direct opposition to this. The works analyzed in this study demonstrate the Northern and Federal hegemonic views on the South and provide an effective counterpoint to the fiction of the Lost Cause narrative. The issue of state's rights and the resultant weakening of the Federal government is also addressed and influenced by the living newspapers. The South's reputation of arguing for greater state's rights and less federal oversight predates the Civil War and is cited as a main cause of the conflict. However, the works of the FTP demonstrate that the South cannot thrive or even maintain a healthy status quo without assistance from the Federal government. Thus, the living newspapers are a tool that reinforces the hegemonic power of the Federal government and, subsequently, the North while at the same time illustrating the inefficacy of the Southern regions ability to govern itself. In discussing the Great Migration, it is important to note that black people were leaving the region not only to flourish economically, but to escape the racism in the South. Because of this, the Great Migration inherently paints the South negatively, while the North is seen as a safe haven.

The conflict between North and South, each region's views regarding the South, and the influence of folk drama are combined most effectively in *King Cotton*, specifically through the marriage of Ruth and Mr. Expert. This union provides several interesting avenues of meaning. As previously stated, the relationship between Ruth and Expert develops in the pastoral setting of the South, yet the marriage takes place in the

North. This may be an attempt to reinforce the concept of the South being a beautiful and romantic place, but one still lacking in the organization, power structures, and law and order of the North. Furthermore, Ruth's choice to leave her home in the South depicts a break in the cycle of poverty, wherein the only means of escape are shown to be migrating away from the region. Finally, the marriage acts as a metaphor for the North rescuing the South from itself.

This study offers a deeper understanding of how the South, at one of its most controversial points in history, was constructed by non-Southerners. Even when written in a Southern tradition of folk drama-- a style that retains a focus on people, family, and nature-- there are still clear remnants of an artificial identity. *King Cotton* is certainly no reclamation of the South, however, because it is rooted in folk drama, it is somewhat more authentic than the way the region was constructed by Northern writers. Though it shares many of these Northern images, it also offers up several contradictions and a more layered approach to the issues surrounding education and cyclical poverty. While there has certainly been extensive study on living newspapers, especially those that came from the Federal Theatre Project, none examine the specific facet of identity construction. This is a vital element of the study of the living newspaper tradition as it demonstrates the lasting effects of these works. Aside from any impact the work of the FTP's living newspapers may have had on the political and social issues that inspired the works, it is clear that these plays at the very least reinforced the Northern construction of Southern identity.

When the Federal Theatre Project was formed by Hallie Flanagan, Elmer Rice, and Harry Hopkins, Flanagan and Rice were hoping that a national theatre would come

from the Project; the general hope for them was that the theatre would become so integral to these communities that they would continue to produce works after the Project had ended. In order to make relevant theatre, the FTP began producing living newspaper plays. This style of theatre influenced documentary theatre for decades after, including today. It raised important social issues while at the same time meeting the needs of the country as it suffered through the Depression. These productions synthesized and dramatized news or social issues from the day into a live format that people could go to see all across the country, thanks to the regional units that reached nationwide. The general form of these works meant that sometimes the topics/content were more controversial than some of the other types of performances that were produced by the Project, which led to the possibility of more censorship for these shows. Though the living newspapers of the FTP were only around for a handful of years, they provided an interesting view into American society, specifically within this study, what was thought of the South. Utilizing Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, it is simple to understand how different regions of the country can have separate national identities. All of the shared ideas and beliefs of a community help to form a community among the people. Throughout this study, these ideas of nation are explored in regard to the 'North' and 'South' of the United States of America with particular attention paid to the South. The other issue that Anderson discusses that is necessary to understanding this study is the use of print media in creating national identity, with specific focus on how newspapers place communities at a specific date in time within the calendar. With this power of newspapers, the living newspapers of the FTP become even more fascinating. Based on cultural works of the time, with

specific focus on H.L. Mencken's "Sahara of the Bozart" and *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, it is clear that the South has been 'othered' by the North. Upon further examination, it is clear that there are distinct Northern criteria about what the South is within these FTP works, specifically the ideas that the South is racist, rural, uneducated, poverty stricken, and unwilling to change. These criteria are used in order to discuss how the Northern (and other regions) units of the FTP were able to construct Southern identity within the living newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project.

Chapter Three of this study looks at three different living newspapers wherein the South is specified as a region. Two of these were produced, *Triple-A Plowed Under* and *Power*, and became some of the most successful of the living newspapers. The third script, entitled *The South*, was specifically about the region, but went unproduced due to the controversial subject matter. The overarching regionalisms of the South are evident through an analysis of the scripts, even when setting and theme were different for each. Written by the New York unit, these three plays provide insight into the artificial image of the South and how it was constructed and influenced by a Northern set of criteria. These three plays demonstrate the widespread acceptance of the artificially constructed image of the South. Though each play focuses on issues specific to the communities in which they are set, each play also demonstrates multiple elements of this constructed Southern identity. Though the South is only featured in two scenes within *Triple-A Plowed Under*, its citizens are depicted as racist, uneducated, and impoverished. The next living newspaper discussed in chapter two is *Power*, which was also highly popular and controversial due to its discussion of public versus private electrification. The South is featured several times throughout this work, with Act Two taking place almost entirely in

the South. This living newspaper depicts the people of the South as uneducated and rural, however Arthur Arent and his team of writers depict the South with more compassion than was typical; *Power* portrays the idea that all American citizens, including the people of the South, have fallen victim to the greed of capitalist corporations. The final living newspaper discussed in this chapter is *The South*, which went unproduced for its controversial focus on the plight of Black Americans in the region. This play focuses heavily on the race issues of the South and shows far more compassion for the Black people in the region than the white people. In addition to the heavy racism within this work, southerners are also depicted as unwilling to change, impoverished, uneducated, and independent. As previously discussed, all of these works were written by the New York unit, which makes the depiction of the South inauthentic.

Chapter Four focuses entirely on the FTP unit at Chapel Hill North Carolina, looking specifically at the unproduced living newspaper *King Cotton*. One of the most interesting things about this work is that it was written in the region in the Southern tradition of folk drama, by two non-Southerners. It was decided that the script would be about cotton, because the problems of the Southern people could be encapsulated and explained by the commodity. Additionally, UNC Chapel Hill had the resources to research such a script topic. Also important is that the *King Cotton* script was not an apologia or embrace of the romanticism South; it is not an attempt at a reclamation of Southern identity by the writers. The South and its citizens are depicted as flawed and distinct, fitting all of the Northern criteria that was laid out in Chapter One. The most interesting thing about this script is that it was written in the Southern tradition of folk drama, melding the forms of folk and living newspaper. Not only does this offer a more

nuanced view of the South, it makes it more authentic. Koch and Smith's work allowed for a different concept of Southern identity. In creating the Southern landscape through folk drama, the beauty of the region was highlighted, while not denying the issues faced by Southerners. Koch, Green, Smith, and Finch created another imagined community for the South through their works at UNC Chapel Hill. As with many of the living newspapers that were in progress when the FTP came under fire by the House Un-American Activities Committee, *King Cotton* never had the chance to be produced.

While it is important that none of the playwrights were from the South, Smith's high regard for the beauty of the region clearly influenced her approach to *King Cotton*.

As noted by Moore:

Betty Smith fell in love with Chapel Hill, as she told it in later years. She was eager to leave New York, and the small southern university town that she glimpsed through the works of Thomas Wolfe seemed an idyllic place. Smith often told the story, according to those who knew her. She got off the bus in Chapel Hill with her youngest daughter, as she recounted it, who asked how long they would stay. "forever," Smith said she told her as they marveled at magnolia blossoms.

Smith's affinity for the South, combined with the influence of the folk drama tradition of the Carolina Playmakers and Chapel Hill at UNC, allowed for the creation of a more complex depiction of the South that largely maintains the Northern-constructed identity while recognizing positive aspects of the region.

My research initially solely focused on the construction of Southern identity within the living newspapers, however it later expanded to further investigate the influence of folk drama on the living newspaper format. This was somewhat of a challenge, however, as there was very little information on the elements necessary to Koch and the Playmaker's concept of folk drama. The most blatant issue for me was that there was no clear, concise definition for the necessary elements within this particular

tradition of folk drama. While there are the words from Koch and several other scholars such as Walter Spearman and Cecelia Moore, a clear definition was lacking. I think that this would be an excellent route to pursue for further research. Perhaps developing defining characteristics of the Carolina Playmakers would be a good place to start. Additionally, exploring the link between the Irish players and folk drama in the South could be an interesting exploration. If folk existed previous to the Irish Players, why it impacted the South especially, and if Southern folk is the most prevalent in the country would be avenues for research.

Another area for further study could perhaps be the history and story of *King Cotton*. From what I was able to ascertain in my research on the subject, it was discussed within various other modes. That is to say, it was included in a discussion of other things. For example, John O'Connor discusses it in his research on the agricultural living newspaper scripts and Cecelia Moore devotes a few pages to it in her study of the Carolina Playmakers, but it is lacking a history of its own. A more readily available and concise history and analysis of the script would perhaps assist in its future utilization on studies about the Federal Theatre or its living newspapers.

Additionally, while I did archival research in addition to my supplementary sources, I believe that there could be a more fleshed out history and analysis of Southern identity with the aid of further research and utilization of primary sources. Though the topic is narrow, it is also incredibly large in scope.

Finally, taking into consideration the current political and social climate of American, it could be fascinating to return to several areas within this study, but I think specifically of how the construction of identity could be utilized in other Federal Theatre

works. While there have been several studies on the black units of the federal theatre and the living newspapers that these units produced (or did not have the chance to produce) looking at how black identities were constructed within these works could be fascinating. Because the work of the FTP overlaps with the Great Migration, an examination of how this relocation interplays with the living newspapers could offer more insight. This avenue of research could create an even larger discussion of the construction of identity and imagined communities throughout more works of the Federal Theatre, both in and out of the South.

This research on the living newspapers of the Federal Theatre is in no way all encompassing. However, it has made clear the construction of identity within the works that the FTP created. Additionally, it provides further insight into the form of folk drama and, furthermore, how the blending of these two distinctive forms created a more balanced and nuanced construction of Southern identity.

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